

Encounters

Gina Godwin

Encounters

by

FARPOINT

Edited by Beverly J. Volker
Additional Editing by Nancy Kippax
Proofreading by Sandy Zier-Tietler
Typing by Renee D. Wilson
Design and Layout by Steven H. Wilson

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Speaking, the Editor

Gentle Reader,

It all began with Steve asking me to edit *Enterprise Betrayed*.

"I don't think I know how to do that anymore," I protested.

"Well, then, just read it and tell me what you think."

"Okay," I agreed, thinking it might make some good summer reading.

But, you know, it's sort of like riding a bicycle. Someone gives you a manuscript, and from somewhere a blue pencil materializes in your hand. Awkward phrases, dangling participles, and, finally, plot holes just seem to pop out; and, before you know it, there you are, back in the editor mode.

From *Enterprise Betrayed* to *Encounters* was a short phone conversation.

"How about editing the Farpoint zine?"

"Sure, why not?"

Why not, indeed. For one thing, *Encounters* is a very different kind of zine from *Contact*. (Anyone remember that little Kirk-Spock zine Nancy Kippax and I used to do?) I would be working with several media universes, not all of which are familiar to me. Secondly, I didn't get to pick the stories. That was all done by Steve. And thirdly, I would be working (with the exception of Lynn Syck, Mary Rottler and Steve) primarily, through Steve, with writers I didn't know. Well, I needed a challenge in my life...

The writers were *all*, to a person, wonderful. They were cooperative, prompt and professional in their responses to my requests for re-writes and re-working of their stories. To my knowledge there was not one bomb threat or temper tantrum even when what I suggested was a major revision.

You are holding what I believe is a collection of excellent SF stories, good writing and creative plotting — an SF media mix with a little something for everyone.

Thanks to each of you who contributed for a job well done.

Thanks to you, the reader, for your support of the zine and the convention. I know from personal experience that the writers would love to hear your comments on their endeavors. You can write c/o the address printed in the front, and your comments will be passed along to them.

And lastly, thanks to Steve and Marion for pulling me back into the zine world, if only for a time. I was so inspired by all this creativity that I was moved to dust the cobwebs out of the old brain and write the first little Trek vignette I've done in years.

Altogether, it was fun. Now you get to enjoy the results.

We reach...

Beu

Man Without a Title

No, this is not a tribute to William Campbell. The above merely refers to the fact that I am NOT the chairman of Farpoint, nor the editor of *Encounters*, and so people ask what I *do*? Well, I tell them, I sign the checks and answer questions and try never to answer the phone. 'Cause *if* I answer the phone, I'll find out that plane tickets cost twice what they did last year, or that we may not have a cover for this zine that's due out in two weeks, or that there are about a hundred thousand little joblets that I forgot to delegate when I (allegedly) abdicated last year.

This is not at all to say that Marion McChesney or Bev Volker have fallen down on their jobs -- hardly! -- it's to say that running cons and publishing zines is never what you expect. The only thing you can expect, as the cliché says, is the unexpected. Take it from someone who's gotten more than one phone call from a celebrity guest that began with, "I'm really sorry to have to do this to you, but..."

So I've been a lot more involved with both Farpoint and *Encounters* than I intended; and, in many ways, I can't say that's a bad thing. I certainly enjoyed writing the four pieces I did for this zine. I hope you'll enjoy reading them. I chose to write my "Transitions" series in four different TV universes -- the four I've been most passionate about during my fandom career: *Space: 1999*, *Lost In Space*, *seaQuest DSV* and *Classic Star Trek*.

What? You loudly demand. What about *Babylon 5*? What about Next Gen? These are the most celebrated S/F shows of all time! Classic Trek was fine, but it's been outmoded, and, geez, Steve, those *other* shows...

Let's just say I'm a sucker for unexplored potential. Those first three shows on my list of favorites all floundered in the ratings and underwent drastic format changes. Those changes left lots of questions unanswered and lots of holes for fan-writers to fill. As for Classic Trek, it, too underwent a drastic format change -- from TV to the big screen. In that change, lots of years went unaccounted for -- lots of potential unexplored. And *all* four series lost major characters during their history -- although Trek waited twenty-eight years to kill Captain Kirk, and John Robinson didn't die, only the actor who played him did. Still, my stories revolve around these losses and transitions.

Now that I've blabbed about my writing, let me say that I'm very pleased with all the stories in this first issue of *Encounters*. The writers have done an incredible job. In the cases of Bev, Lynn and Mary, that's no more than I'd expect. Their contributions inject a note of zine tradition into the mix, giving us the perspective of writers who've done this since the fandom was new, writers who still have much to say to us.

And I eagerly welcome Jackie Green, Ann Wheeler, Karen Donnelly and Phil Giunta. These are writers who are new to the zine community, I believe, and take fan fiction in some new directions. Ann and Karen bring us fiction from B5 and Voyager, Jackie and Phil look at classic Trek characters in a new way, and Phil even brings us a gentle parody of Fandom. Thank you all for your hard work and professionalism.

And thanks to you, our readers and attendees of Farpoint. Without you, this creative effort would be meaningless.

STEVE

STAR TREK

Just a Matter of Time

by Beverly J. Volker

The *Enterprise* hung suspended, her silver patina gleaming against the ebony backdrop of space, dotted with pinpoints of diamond fire stars. The long, tube-shaped nacelles with their glowing red tips looked like twin cigars and the huge saucer section boasted her name and the call letters, NCC-1701. A cruiser-class vessel, she was Starfleet's finest, the ultimate in technology. And she was his. Or was it the other way around?

James Kirk remembered the first time he'd seen her. The word had come from headquarters. He was being given a ship, his first command, the answer to his dreams, the goal of years of preparation. It was not just any command. *Enterprise* was already a legend, had already carved a reputation under Captain Christopher Pike. Kirk, too, was on his way to becoming a legend, being the youngest officer ever to be given command of a starship. It was to be a marriage of man and machine. It was, in fact, more of a marriage than anyone could have anticipated.

A junior lieutenant, not much younger than Kirk himself, had escorted the Captain to the tethered giant waiting in space dock for him to board. Kirk was able to observe her from the shuttle viewport as they approached. He still remembered how his heart rose up in his throat as he caught his first glimpse. He still remembered the youthful enthusiasm that drove him confidently toward his destiny. It was love at first sight, a love that would last a lifetime.

Kirk stood staring at the huge, lifelike painting of his first command that now hung over the stone fireplace in his home. The painting was a gift from his crew on the occasion of his retirement from duty. The first time. The time it had been wrong. He had been too young then for retirement, but he hadn't realized it. McCoy had tried to tell him. He hadn't been listening. Spock was going back to Vulcan. The five year mission had been difficult, tiring, and emotionally draining. Starfleet was offering the returning hero a promotion, an Earthside position where he could be a living legend, a political coupe.

It was one of the times in his life when Kirk had made a wrong decision and it had been a whopper. Thankfully, it was an error that would eventually be rectified, and he and Spock and many of his original crew would be given a second chance to serve together for more successful missions aboard the *Enterprise*.

Kirk sighed, smiling ruefully at his painting. The *Enterprise* looked a little like a cumbersome whale compared to later, more streamlined versions. She was like a vintage car, one that seemed sleek and modern in her day, but old-fashioned and obsolete compared to current models. But, like a vintage vehicle, she was also a classic. And in Kirk's mind, all the up-to-date technology that current ships had to offer, still didn't improve upon his Silver Lady.

The buzzer to his door interrupted Kirk's reverie. He glanced at the viewer, knowing whose face he would find there.

"Come in, Bones," Kirk pushed the button to release the lock, then realized that it was keyed to McCoy's touch anyway. In a few seconds, the old friend was striding toward him.

"Spock here yet?"

Kirk grinned at the doctor's never-ending tendency to be one-up on the Vulcan. He shook his head. "He called earlier and said that the meeting at Headquarters was running longer than he'd planned. He'll meet us at the restaurant."

Dinner at their favorite eating spot was as regular an event as their three divergent schedules would allow and Kirk often found that since his official "retirement" he was usually the one who had the most difficulty finding the time to get together with his two friends. However, this night he had been adamant about seeing them; he had an ulterior motive which he had to give one last try.

Years of close association made McCoy suspicious and his suspicions made him sour. "I cancelled two appointments because you were so insistent that we get together tonight. Now, Spock might not show up..."

"Thank you, Bones." Kirk smiled his most charming smile. "Don't worry, Spock will be there. He'll come right from the meeting." The captain drew his eyes back toward the painting on his wall. "I was just enjoying one of my favorite pieces of art. She really was beautiful, wasn't she?"

McCoy followed Kirk's gaze. "In her day. She's a bit obsolete by present standards, though." He chuckled. "Just like us, I guess."

Kirk scowled, tapping his friend's shoulder. "Speak for yourself, Doctor. I don't plan to ever become obsolete."

"It's not always what you plan," McCoy countered.

"Well, *Enterprise* held her own." Kirk's gaze wandered back to the picture, "even when we had to take her down, she went out in a blaze of glory, doing her duty for what had to be."

"That how you plan to go out, Jim?" McCoy's tone was only half teasing. Kirk's voice matched his.

"Perhaps," he grinned. "But not for quite awhile yet. I hope ... Now, if we don't get moving, Spock will beat us to the restaurant, yet."

The Brownings Restaurant had long been a favorite of the former *Enterprise* officers for its cozy, yet elegantly tasteful atmosphere and for its fine cuisine. Within its richly paneled walls, brass appointments gleamed in the soft lighting. Each table, covered in crisp white linen, seemed to be private, set apart from the others. Kirk, Spock and McCoy had years earlier claimed their favorite, in front of a paned picture window that looked out over the Pacific Ocean. A quick call to the owner, a quiet, unpretentious man claiming to be a descendent of the renowned poet, always assured them that "their" table would be waiting when they arrived.

As usual, dinner had been satisfying, filling both hunger and taste to each man's desire. The waiter had cleared away the last of their plates and Kirk leaned against the tall tapestry-covered back of his chair, sipping the rich, red wine in his crystal glass. Before him, the sun had already set over the ocean and the first stars were beginning to dot the horizon. To his right, Spock also sipped, leisurely, at a glass of wine, apparently in no hurry to end the evening.

McCoy, opposite Spock, had ordered a mint julep and was fidgeting with the straw while the ice made clinking sounds in the glass.

"My meal was delicious. I think the chef outdid himself tonight." The doctor let out a satisfied sigh. "How was your steak, Jim?"

"Fine ... "

McCoy didn't wait for him to elaborate. "And your vegetable ... thing, Spock. Even that looked pretty tasty."

Spock nodded, "I assure you, Doctor, the timbale was excellent."

The dinner conversation had been relaxed, sprinkled with the gentle teasing and banter that was part of the comfortable companionship the three friends had, after so many years, learned to enjoy with each other. They genuinely liked being in each other's company. Being together could almost always make any situation more pleasant and at times even made the unbearable bearable.

Kirk knew the other two shared these feelings and decided the mellow, after-dinner good cheer they were all savoring made the timing perfect for his planned pitch.

"Well, gentlemen," he began in his most persuasive tone, "there is still time for you to change your minds and come with me to the launching of the new *Enterprise* next week."

McCoy rolled his eyes indicating he had been through all this before and hoped the subject was closed. He should have known Jim Kirk better.

"Just because you got suckered into performing at this publicity circus doesn't mean that Spock and I have to subject ourselves to it." He was not going to fall prey to Kirk's coaxing this time.

"I did not get 'suckered in'," Kirk denied. "My being there was a direct request from Admiral Jasper. And I concurred that having a captain and crew members from the former *Enterprise* would lend an aura of continuity to the affair. Besides, it's the *Enterprise*. I think it would be *fun* for the three of us to be together on her bridge for her launching. You agree, don't you, Spock?" He turned to the Vulcan.

"You're asking Spock to agree that something is *fun*!?" McCoy was astonished. "Jim-boy, I'm afraid retirement has addled your brain more than I thought."

"Doctor, I believe it was merely the Captain's enthusiasm for the new ship that caused him to speak in those terms," Spock defended. McCoy shook his head.

"I believe it was the Captain's 'misery-loves-company' syndrome. He has to attend, so he wants us bored, hassled by the press, and performing like dancing Vegan bruins as well, just so he doesn't have to do it alone."

"He will not be alone," Spock corrected. "I believe Mister Chekov and Mister Scott also will be present."

"Besides," McCoy ignored Spock's information. "Jim could never say no to an attractive female, and Helen Jasper isn't a bad looker even with her high-ranking military demeanor."

"Now, wait a minute, Bones." Kirk had been quiet, allowing his friends to discuss him as if he weren't there, but he was not going to let this dig slip by. "Helen is a fine officer and she does an excellent job with Public Affairs. She keeps Starfleet's image impressive in the non-military eye."

"I never said she lacked tact and the power of persuasion ..." McCoy argued. Spock cut in smoothly.

"Doctor, I do not believe Admiral Jasper's abilities were the topic of discussion here."

"Well, I think they are, Spock. It was her ability to persuade Jim to do this to begin with, that's now causing this pressure on us."

Kirk was on the verge of anger at McCoy.

"Nobody persuaded me, McCoy and nobody is pressuring you. Just because I wanted my friends, two fellow-officers who served with me during the best part of my career, to be with me when the Fleet launches our successor ... Forget it. If you don't want to do it, don't worry about it."

Silence hung over the table for several heartbeats, evoked by the only thing which could have caused it - Kirk's apparent frustration with the two men he had pointedly called friends. Spock broke the silence.

"Jim, your presence at the ceremony will indeed be most beneficial in many ways, and I believe that you should be there. I would have been most gratified to accompany you, but as I have already explained to you, my father and Governor Dahlt of the Veron Colony are arriving on Earth the very day of the launching. Veron is a remote colony and Dahlt has never before travelled off-world. It has taken Sarek nearly a year to set up this meeting with the Federation. Veron is rich in minerals that would be useful to us, and my father assured the Governor that my experience with space exploration would give him a fair assessment of Starfleet's involvement on other Federation colonies. I cannot very well not be there."

"But couldn't you meet with Dahlt when we get back from the cruise? It's only a quick trip," Kirk responded.

"I'm afraid Dahlt's visit to Earth will be rather brief, too. He is uneasy about being away from home very long."

"Surely Sarek and some of the other officials will want to give him a tour of Earth, hold a reception while he's here." Kirk still believed it could be worked out.

"I think not," Spock explained. "The Veronians are not a very social race. It's a rather significant move that Sarek managed to persuade him to come at all."

"Ah, Sarek is very good at diplomacy." Kirk smiled, thinking of the older Vulcan. "I'm sure he could convince Dahlt to let Earth show him some hospitality."

"Jim, it would be unfair to ask that of my father," Spock sighed and leaned back in his chair. "The situation with the Veronians is ... touchy at best, and Sarek has had to make many concessions to Dahlt's reluctance to come, one of them being that he would be exposed to as few people or as little of Earth's culture as possible. You of all people should understand the difficulty in dealing with other races."

"I do, Spock, but I'm disappointed." Kirk made a face that suddenly turned into a grin. "And I never say never."

McCoy could apparently keep quiet no longer.

"C'mon, Jim, give him a break. You've already made Spock feel bad about not being able to go with you. What more do you want?"

"I want the two of you on that maiden voyage. I can't explain why, but it's important to me. I want you to be able to understand that and the excuses that I've been getting for the past two weeks don't seem good enough." Kirk's eyes said that he was being honest, not just persuasive.

"It's just that the timing is all wrong," McCoy hedged.

"No, it's not the timing. You've already made it very clear that you don't really want to go."

"Captain," McCoy gave Kirk a long look. "How many times, in the years I've known you, have I done something at your request that I didn't really want to do?"

"Then why are you being so stubborn this time?" Kirk expected the truth.

"All right, Jim, one more time I'll try to make you understand. Doctor Harley Whitcomb is giving a seminar at the Academy at the very same time the new *Enterprise* is being launched," McCoy spoke with deliberate slowness, his Georgia accent all but lost in his preciseness. "Harley and I went to Med School together and he has become famous in the field of research on the effects of space medicine on certain diseases, both human and alien. A subject, which you might recall, is of particular interest to me as well."

"I have not seen Harley in twenty years. Our paths never seem to cross and this is a golden opportunity not only to study what he has learned, but to trade shop talk as well. Can you please try to understand that?"

"I don't find your patronizing attitude amusing, Doctor," Kirk snapped.

"Then stop acting like someone who's peeved because he can't get his own way."

Spock's eyebrow shot up.

"Really, Doctor, Jim is not ..."

Kirk held up a hand. "No, Spock, Bones is partly right in what he says. I can admit that I'm more than a little peeved that neither of you will be with me. But it's not purely selfish reasons. *Enterprise* has been associated with us for more than thirty years. Spock you even served aboard her under Captain Pike. I think - and apparently Admiral Jasper is of this notion as well - that it is important that we show our endorsement of the new vessel that will carry that name, by our presence at her launching. Captain Harriman is apparently young, inexperienced, but perhaps Starfleet saw something in him to give him command."

"From his psyche-profile it certainly isn't the same thing they saw in the young James Kirk," McCoy commented. Kirk looked over at him, then grinned.

"Yeah, I'm not sure he'd have been my choice, but I didn't know you'd checked, Bones."

"Did you think I wouldn't be interested in who's commanding a ship called *Enterprise*?" The question was almost rhetorical. Kirk sighed.

"No, I guess I didn't think that at all."

Spock drew Kirk's attention. "Jim, McCoy and I both have unfortunate but valid reasons why we can't be with you on the new *Enterprise* next week, but I do think that you overestimate the importance of our presence. We served aboard *Enterprise*, but she was your ship. You were the Captain, the one who led her through her many successful missions. It is your presence that will represent her in support of Captain Harriman's voyage."

Kirk's eyes misted. Even after all these years, he never got used to the Vulcan's impromptu show of loyalty. "Thank you, Spock. But you're wrong about one thing. I never overestimate the importance of your presence. Or McCoy's."

In the end, Kirk knew that the discussion was over and that it was one argument he wasn't going to win. The irony was that he perfectly understood, and, in fact, agreed with McCoy's and Spock's reasons for not going. He hated public relation functions as much as they did, was embarrassed by the press hanging on to his every word, asking inane questions that he was supposed to answer seriously. He didn't blame his friends one bit for not canceling what were,

for them, important engagements.

Still, he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling he had about attending the ceremony alone. Of course as Spock had already pointed out, he wouldn't really be the only representative of the old *Enterprise* there. Montgomery Scott would never pass up the chance to visit the engine room of a new starship and, Kirk suspected, especially one named *Enterprise*. Pavel Chekov was apparently between missions and available, so he had no reason not to go. Besides, Kirk had always believed that his former navigator rather enjoyed the attention he received as part of Kirk's crew.

Yet despite these two old friends being with him, Kirk could not quite explain his own contradictory feelings of anticipation and reluctance. McCoy would probably say it was his dread of being on the bridge of a new starship and not being in command. Kirk had hoped he was past that and really ready to accept his retirement from active service, but the doctor was usually right about such things. He simply knew he would have felt better with Spock and McCoy where they belonged - at his side. And it would have been fun.

Kirk did not see Spock or McCoy after the night of the dinner, which had ended in pleasant comradeship once the topic of the *Enterprise* had been dispensed with. There had been no need for apologies for harsh words or ungenerous attitudes. It was the nature of their friendships that they could be themselves, speak honestly without fear of censure or permanent damage. Still, the week's activities had kept them apart and busy. Both men had called Kirk the night before the scheduled launch to wish him well and he, in turn, had reciprocated on their endeavors. They all agreed on a night for another scheduled dinner after Kirk returned from the *Enterprise's* short maiden voyage, and both Spock and McCoy warned that they would be anxious to hear what the new ship was like.

Kirk tugged at his dress uniform and straightened his back as he slipped through the private entrance to Admiral Jasper's office. Already inside, Scott and Chekov greeted him cheerfully and the admiral smiled a welcome. In a few minutes they would be transported to the new ship, where crew and press were already assembled. The USS *Enterprise*, NCC-1701-B would be launched in traditional military style, and Captain James T. Kirk, Ret., would be on her bridge.

The lock was still keyed to McCoy's touch and the doctor let himself inside Kirk's home without hesitation. Around the rooms were boxes, crates, cartons, some sealed, some only half-filled. Kirk's possessions were being sorted through, moved around, packed for storage or shipment. McCoy heard sounds of activity in the den. He moved toward it, knowing who he would find.

Spock was seated in Kirk's chair, behind his massive mahogany desk. Several drawers were open, some of their contents in stacks on the desk's surface.

"I got a communication from Peter today telling us he received the shipment we sent and giving us carte blanche to disperse Jim's things as we deemed proper," McCoy opened. "He said he

would try to get here next week to help us, but he thought we'd probably know, better than him, where Jim would want all his stuff to go."

At first, Spock did not answer, then he picked up an old leather-bound book from one of the stacks.

"*A Tale of Two Cities*. A first edition. I gave it to Jim one year for his birthday."

"I remember. He loved that kind of thing," McCoy said. "You should keep it, Spock."

Spock laid the book back down on the pile.

"We should have gone with him, Doctor."

"What?" McCoy was caught off guard by Spock's sudden admission. "Gone? Gone where?"

Spock looked up. "Don't deny that it wasn't the first thing you thought of when we heard he had been killed. That it hasn't gnawed at you in the two months since. That it's the one thing neither of us have talked about. Jim wanted us to go on that voyage with him. He tried very hard to convince us ..."

"Now wait a minute!" McCoy did not want to get into this. "Are you trying to imply that we're somehow responsible for Jim's death, that if we had been there it wouldn't have happened? Because if you are, you're wrong. We, you, me, even Jim, none of us could have foreseen such a bizarre happening on such a routine trip."

"I am merely remembering the Captain telling us that he knew he'd die alone, that as long as we were there, he was safe. He was correct." Spock rose from the desk and moved to the big stone fireplace, over which still hung the painting of the original *Enterprise*.

McCoy followed him. "Look, Spock, I know it hurts like hell. There's a great big hole in this heart in here and sometimes the life-blood just seems to pour out. Some nights the grief is so strong I can't even go to bed. I just pace the floor like if I could do something I could bring him back. But to blame ourselves, to think that somehow, by being there, we could have prevented it ..."

"We'll never know that, Doctor." The Vulcan's voice was soft, pain filled. McCoy touched his arm.

"That's right, we won't. And speculating on it is ... illogical."

"It does not trouble you?" Spock asked.

"Yes, it troubles me. Of course it troubles me. Is that what you wanted to hear?" McCoy challenged. "And now having admitted that, will it change anything? Will it bring Jim back? Will it make our memory of him less painful to know that he was right?"

Spock lowered his eyes. "I'm ... sorry."

McCoy drew a breath. "Jim told me, not long ago, standing right here in front of that painting that he wanted to go out in a heroic way, doing his duty, saving lives. Well, he did just that. Sooner than expected, I'm sure, but we don't usually get to pick our time. That's what we have to remember, Spock, that he lived - and died - being a true hero. It's what he wanted, what he was."

Spock nodded. Both men were silent, remembering, missing the one who wasn't there. They were surrounded by his possessions. They let his aura fill their beings. At last Spock glanced up at the wall.

"What shall we do with the painting, Bones?"

"You should take it, Spock. You were on the *Enterprise* longest and loved the ship as

much as he did," McCoy decided. Spock shook his head.

"The ship was merely an excellent piece of machinery. It was that man on the bridge that gave it life." McCoy knew that Spock was right. James Kirk was the *Enterprise*.

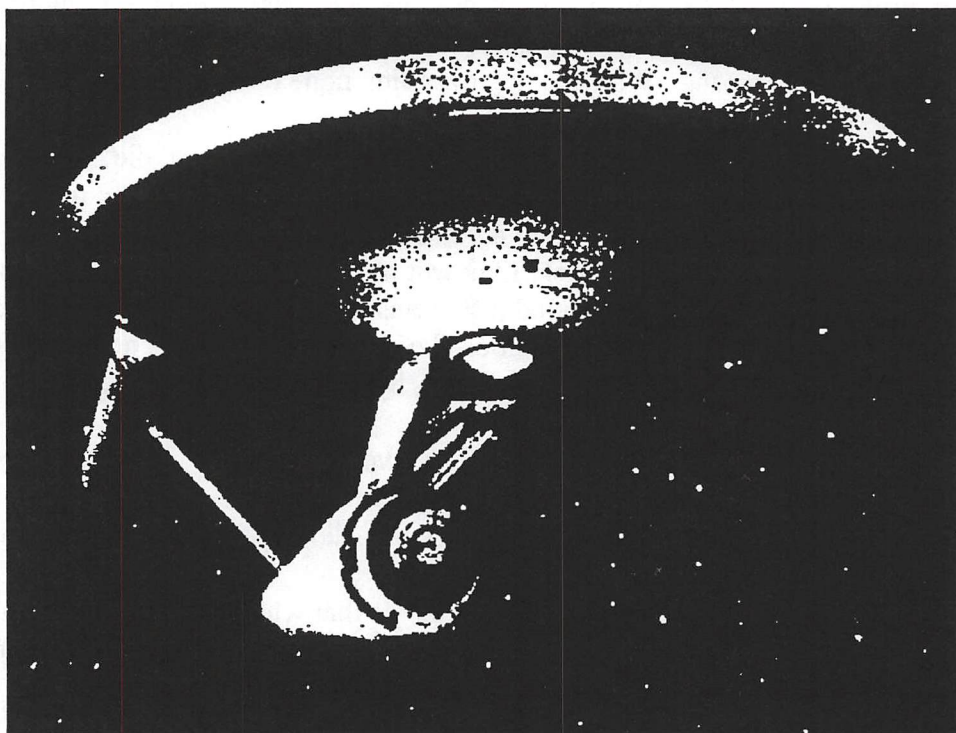
"Well, what do you think we should do with the painting?"

Spock considered. "When the original *Enterprise* was re-designed just before the V'ger mission, there was a place in the assembly room with pictures of all the vessels throughout history that bore the name *Enterprise*. I think Jim's first command should hang in 1701-B."

McCoy nodded. "I think you're right, Spock."

"Then we are in agreement?"

McCoy grinned. "You hear that, Jim-boy, wherever you are? Spock and I are in agreement. This is an occasion."



SPACE: 1999

Transition: 2000

by Steven H. Wilson

They had assured him it would be painless.

Not that such things mattered to Bergman, really. The discovery of new knowledge wasn't meant to be a painless process. If it were, such discoveries would be commonplace, and knowledge, precious knowledge, would not be valued.

They were on the moon's surface, Koenig, Helena Russell, Alan Carter, Tony Verdeschi, two of his security team, and Bergman himself. The upgrade of the generators to the massive force field towers was almost complete.

It was time.

Each space suit had a bleeder valve on its oxygen pack, so that the system could be purged after use before being recharged. It was unthinkable that anyone would even touch it while in vacuum.

Calmly, with a small hint of a smile playing over his features and a sense of anticipation, Victor Bergman reached over his shoulder and opened the valve. Before the others noticed anything amiss, before the shock registered on their faces, Victor Bergman was dead.

Helena Russell hesitated but a moment as she drew the sheet up over his face. She wanted one last look, but what she saw wasn't pleasant. It brought her no comfort. If only she could summon up the memory--summon it up clearly--of Victor's face the last time he had smiled at her. If only she could feel his warm, calloused hand, the last time it had squeezed her shoulder. How odd, she had thought many times in the past, that so knowledgeable a scientist should be so warm and caring a person.

Victor was an eccentric, to be sure. He had never married, for he didn't think it right to ask a wife and family to take a backseat to his one true passion: the quest for knowledge. It was a pity, Helena thought, for he would have made such a wonderful father. Indeed he was a father figure to the whole of Moonbase Alpha, the respected patriarch who'd come here with her inception and never left.

To Helena, in particular, he was a key figure in a life which she'd had to rebuild almost from the foundations. Four years ago, after her husband had been lost in an early exploratory mission to the outer solar system, she'd come to Moonbase Alpha for a change. She'd worked for the ILC for years, but had never visited their premiere facility. When the life she'd known ended, its death knell sounded in a simple, unfinished transmission about radiation bombardment, she'd decided it was time

to see what the new frontier looked like. Perhaps she wanted to feel closer to Lee, too.

Moonbase Alpha was as close as she could get.

She'd met Victor Bergman when he'd come to earth during the Ultra Probe inquiries. She'd been assigned to evaluate the mental stability of Tony Cellini, the commander and sole survivor. Cellini had disliked her intensely, and Bergman had stepped in to act as a buffer between them after the initial hostilities. She'd appreciated that gesture, and had spent a great deal of time with the Professor during his involuntary stay on earth. She'd found him a good listener as well as an excellent conversationalist.

When she'd come to Alpha, his friendly face had been her first anchor, the only familiar part of a new life. Although she was far along in her career, earth's leading expert in space medicine, she came to see the old man as a mentor. He was her sounding board, her reflection, her devil's advocate, her confessor.

He had been the same to John Koenig for years. When Koenig and Helena had finally met, after years of being involved in the same projects, but from opposite ends of the spectrum, Victor had helped them find the common ground they needed to establish a working relationship. Without him, they might very well have hated each other. With him... both widowed, both intensely concerned for their people, Helena and Koenig were not quick to allow themselves to be emotionally entangled. They both knew as well as Victor did, though, that the last twelve months had seen the two of them fall deeply in love. It was a love of which Victor approved, one for which he was almost solely responsible.

And now he was dead.

The blue flesh of his oxygen starved face, the contortions involuntarily wrought by dying muscles, left behind a horrid picture. Helena wondered how much he'd suffered. Death had come quickly, but had it been merciful? Or was the tale of pain and suffering told by Victor's features true? She couldn't bear to think of him in pain.

A commlock chime announced an arrival in Medical Centre. The door quietly slid open to admit John Koenig. For a moment, Helena considered trying to hide the tears that were coming to her eyes. She quickly realized, however, that there was little point in hiding from him. With Victor gone, he was now the one who knew her best.

He didn't bother saying anything, for there was nothing to say which would bring any comfort. He crossed to her and stood beside her. For a brief time he gazed down at the covered body, his own features grim. Then, giving the corpse of his friend and mentor a brief squeeze on the motionless arm, he reached out for Helena.

She fell against him, burying herself in his embrace. Neither looked to see if the other was weeping. For an undetermined time, they stood there--prolonging, as much as possible, the last time together the three of them would ever have.

When Alpha had been designed--decades before its final implementation--earth's nations had been ever on the brink of one disastrous war or another. Consequently, the blueprints had included many provisions to guard against attack by hostile powers. Chief among them was the allocation of space at the lowest level of the Main Mission Tower for an emergency operations centre--a "bomb shelter" of sorts for command staff.

One disastrous war had come a decade and a half ago, and its chief by-product had been a new spirit of international cooperation on earth. Part of this cooperation was enforced by mass fear

of the terrible biological and atomic weapons used in that war, part of it stemmed from the fact that the war had reduced the population by almost fifty per cent. There simply weren't as many people on earth getting in each others' way anymore, and those survivors needed each others' assistance to overcome famine and disease left in the wake of military violence.

Moonbase Alpha, when finally constructed, was built as a symbol of that international cooperative spirit. Defense became a low priority, and the Emergency Op-Center idea was abandoned. The sub-basement of Main Mission was left empty, however, and used only for storage.

Following Alpha's recent encounter with the warring worlds of Betha and Delta, it had been Victor who'd pointed out the vulnerability of Main Mission to attacks from space. Ensconced in the relative protection of the moon's home solar system, there wasn't too much concern over having the command facility sitting somewhat precariously atop the base. It put the staff's interface equipment close to the antenna arrays, conserving resources and allowing for better quality data transmission. In the unfriendly environment of deep space, however, it didn't make sense to leave the most critical piece of Alpha's operations most vulnerable to attack.

The cleaning out of the underground facility had begun months ago, an occasional project for those who had time in their schedules. (And not many Alphans had time in their schedules--most everyone's work was crucial to survival in space).

Now, with Victor gone, Koenig had stepped up the pace, mapped out a schedule, and implemented Operation Burrow. In two weeks, Alpha's new Command Centre would be operational, and Main Mission would stand empty.

Koenig would admit, to himself, that his motivation for making the move now was a sentimental one. If he was to continue without Victor, he wanted to put a whole new face on his command. He was going to have to promote people into new positions of responsibility, establish a new inner circle of leadership. He didn't want them to feel intimidated by the ghosts of the old regime. What was more, he didn't want to tread on his memories of his old friend. Main Mission and his spacious office belonged to another time--Victor's time.

Today would be the last meeting of the command staff held in his private office. Already, many of its fixtures had been cannibalized for use below, leaving the room looking something like an abandoned storefront. One operative--speaking in tones he thought the Commander couldn't hear--had suggested the mounting of a FOR SALE sign in the window which looked out on the lunar surface. Koenig had to admit the idea had its humor.

His people were beginning to gather. Sandra Benes sat quietly at the conference table, reviewing her notes. Beside her, Paul Morrow's and David Kano's chairs sat empty. She tried not to notice. The tragedies which had taken the two men from among them were still fresh, still painful. Paul's death, particularly, had changed her, made her quiet, perhaps toughened her.

Alan Carter strode in, followed by Tony Verdeschi, looking uncomfortable in the flame-colored sleeve of the Main Mission Controller. It was obvious the security chief felt out of place here. He was normally as gregarious as Carter, if a trifle more serious. He knew he'd been invited today to fill an empty position, though, and he knew how that position had been emptied.

Victor's death would only make the strain greater on Verdeschi, and he knew it. Koenig had asked him last week to take over Paul Morrow's slot. Paul had been in charge of base operations, and thus, Koenig's second in command. It was well-known, however, that Victor Bergman would have commanded had anything happened to Koenig. Paul was merely Prime Minister, as it were, not heir apparent. Tony Verdeschi was now both.

Koenig had little other choice. Not that he disliked Verdeschi, but he didn't know him well. He'd only become head of security following the death of the man who'd commanded it when Koenig had come to Alpha. The security chief was never included in command staff meetings, and rarely accompanied Koenig on reconnaissance missions.

With the attrition in the security force over the last year, however, the chief was called on to be more active. Besides, Verdeschi, like Koenig, believed a leader belonged on the front lines, facing the same danger his subordinates did. He was truly superior to his predecessor anyway. Now that they were in space, security's function had changed. Once they had protected the base against infiltration by possible terrorists, controlled members of the press, done little more than airport security could have been expected to do two decades ago. Now they were called upon to settle the internal disputes that came with the confinement of Alpha's new life. They observed and confined those who became violent from the strain and monotony and hopelessness of endless space travel. They faced any number of unexpected dangers from outside the walls of Alpha.

Tony was quick on his feet, adaptable, just suspicious enough, and relatively calm. He had a temper, yes, but not the unpredictable one Alan Carter often displayed. That trait had made the chief pilot undesirable for the number two spot, although Carter had become less confrontational of late, with Koenig, anyway.

Koenig had still found no one to replace Kano. His computer skills had been unparalleled. Now that he was gone, and the computer was in need of such drastic overhaul work, Koenig was leaving it to Sandra to fill in and establish a clear course of action for how Alpha would handle its computer needs in future.

At last Helena arrived, dry-eyed but looking worn. With her entrance, Tony looked a bit nervously at the chair next to Sandra's. Obviously, he'd wanted to avoid actually sitting in it as long as possible. Time was up. He sat with an apologetic grimace, directed particularly at Sandra. She did not look up.

Koenig himself did not bother to sit. He often did not, being too full of frustrated energy. Today, he knew, the assembled group also needed a clear leadership figure on which to focus.

"I take it you've finished the autopsy, Dr. Russell," he said.

She nodded. "Yes. It reveals nothing unexpected. Cause of death was asphyxia."

Koenig looked to Carter. "You checked out the suit?"

"Yeah. The valve stem seal was weak--an almost invisible stress point. The valve was shut tight as you please."

"How did it--?" Koenig began, but Helena leaned forward urgently.

"No," she protested, "that's wrong!"

Koenig looked at her sharply. He was met, not with determination, however, but uncertainty. Helena looked as though she wasn't sure she'd even spoken, or why she had.

"Helena?"

She shook her head. "I--I don't know, John, for a moment..."

"The seal was torn, Doc," said Alan. "There's no two ways about it."

Koenig circled to stand over Carter. "And just how in the hell did a defective system get past inspection? Was it inspected?"

"Of course, Commander," said Carter testily. "We never let someone on the surface in an untested suit. The defect must have been..."

"I'm hearing a lot of unfinished sentences today," snapped Koenig.

Carter sighed. "Looking at it now, I don't know how it could have been missed; but it was missed."

"Who inspected the suits last?" Koenig demanded.

"Bill Fraser. He's the most competent man I've got."

"Hindsight is always twenty-twenty," Helena said quietly. "It's easy now to say Bill should have noticed a defect, but--"

"I want all suits triple-checked from now on. I'm not going to lose anyone else to a damned mechanical failure. Understood, Captain?" Koenig realized he was right in Carter's face.

The pilot looked at the floor. "Understood, Commander."

Koenig turned to Helena. "You had something else to add?"

"No, Commander. I--It was nothing. I suppose I'm just having trouble... accepting it."

"You are not alone, Helena," Sandra said quietly.

"No," agreed Koenig. "This is going to be hard on us all. The memorial service should help. I want to have it tomorrow." He looked to Helena. "Any problems?"

"None," she said. "We're finished with the body."

The rest of the meeting went quietly. The specifics of Operation Burrow were hammered into place, the schedule finalized. There was nothing more to say about Victor's death, at least nothing appropriate to a staff meeting.

When it was over, Koenig dismissed all but Helena and Tony. He turned to Verdeschi, who still seemed quite stiff.

"How are you settling in?" he asked.

"Well, Commander--"

Koenig immediately held up his hand. "Tony... why don't you try calling me 'John?' If we don't seem comfortable with this arrangement, odds are no one else will be."

"All right, John. I don't know if the others--especially Sandra--are comfortable with my being in charge. I can't say as I blame them. It's going to take some time."

"Agreed. Let's hope time is something we have in abundance. Take it slowly. They'll come around. Now, I wanted you in on our next discussion."

"I want to know more about this reaction you had to Alan's statement about the valve," he said without preamble to Helena.

"I can't tell you any more, John. It was like a sense of *deja vu*, as if I'd heard your question answered before, with a different answer."

"You think it wasn't valve failure?"

"Of course it was valve failure. What else would it be?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. You jumped in and said Alan was wrong."

"Yes I did. What he said about the valve failing--being completely shut--it just *felt* wrong."

"Felt wrong?" asked Verdeschi. "Doctor, you're a professional. Facts are facts. We haven't worked together that much, but I don't think you're the type to make assertions you can't back up."

"I know it doesn't make any sense," she agreed. "It's just that--for an instant--I knew what Alan was saying wasn't true--as certainly as I know my own name."

Verdeschi leaned in toward her. "What part of what he said wasn't true?"

"I don't know. The whole sensation was gone as quickly as it came." She looked to Koenig. "Look, just forget it. I think I'm just having trouble coping with Victor's death. That's all."

He tried to soften his face. Now, more than ever, she needed him, and he was afraid he was

being needlessly harsh. He reached out and clasped her wrist. "You're sure you're okay now?"

She nodded and forced a smile. "Don't worry."

He would worry, and he wouldn't forget, but further discussion was useless. Verdeschi looked to him, saw the decision in his eyes, and as quickly dropped the subject.

Helena returned to her quarters feeling weak. Everything she had told Koenig and Verdeschi was true. She couldn't explain why she'd said what she did. The feeling had come and gone, leaving not a trace of itself behind.

Well, perhaps a trace. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, and in her dreams in the nights which would come, she would always have the feeling that Victor Bergman's death was not an accident.

But, as Verdeschi had said, facts were facts, and she was a professional. As the days progressed, pushing Bergman's death farther and farther from her, as the business of survival demanded her ever-increased attention, the feeling would fade from her conscious mind.

Then, in the minds of everyone on Alpha, Victor Bergman's death would be considered an accident.

"Have I talked to you before?"

"Perhaps. If you did, I do not remember. It may have been so long ago that I have purged my memory of the conversation. It may happen in a future yet unknown to me."

"How is that possible?"

"All things are possible."

"Why did you ask me to come here?"

"There is potential among your fellows. It is potential which must be nurtured if it is to be fulfilled. The variety of life in the universe includes many seeds. Left to their own devices, many would die, subject to the harshness of life in the cosmos."

"Just as you, in your past life, might have fertilized a particular plant to make it healthy enough to grow, or set aside an area for a dying species to survive, so we choose those species whose survival might benefit us, and nurture them."

"Are you God?"

"No more than you are God, Victor Bergman, and no less. You are one with Us now."

"And why am I here?"

"We have selected you to be the nurturer of those you call Alphans. You shall engineer the means of their survival, intervene when necessary, challenge when called for. You will be their gardener, as it were."

"Or their guardian angel?"

"I believe you once called it 'a sort cosmic intelligence.'"

"Then I was right. You have been protecting us all along."

"Yes. But my attempts were obvious, clumsy. I was not familiar enough with your species, and often you suspected my intervention. I believe you can be more subtle--protect your charges without their knowledge. Without your help, they would die."

"And with my help?"

"They may die anyway. They may conquer all that is. The choice is theirs."

"Not mine?"

"Never yours. Your abilities will be limited. You may give them the opportunity to survive always, the guarantee of survival never."

"God helps those who help themselves?"

"That is quite true."

"Then I'm afraid I have to ask again: are we God?"

"We are scientists."

"You didn't answer my question."

"No. I doubt I ever will. Do you regret sacrificing the life you knew, Victor Bergman?"

"I regret only the pain it caused the others."

"The pain will pass, and you will do them the most good here. Your work is about to begin."

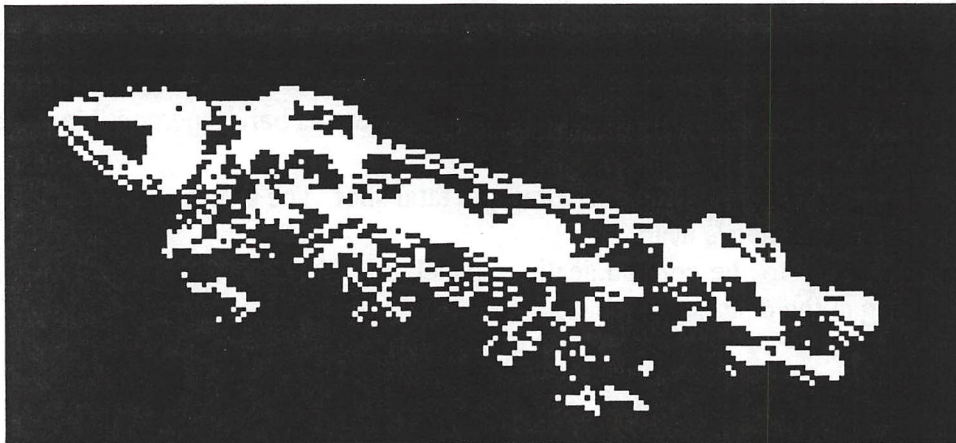
"Is it?"

"Your moon is headed directly for a space warp. There is a great possibility the stresses placed upon it will tear it apart. You can help. You are also allowed to guide it to its destination. There are many possibilities. Reach out with your mind and examine each. What do you see?"

"Hmm. It's beautiful... and dangerous. I wonder if you'd give me some time to examine this one more closely."

"The planet Psychon? An odd choice. It's nearly barren."

"True, but I sense it has potential to be interesting."



STAR TREK

A Passion For Peace

By Philip Giunta

As the woman entered the bridge of the ship, she quickly inspected the scene of charred flesh and burning circuitry. If the woman was affected by any of this she did not allow it to show.

"Commander Jennera, our shields are down seventeen percent," announced a voice through the heavy fog. It was her navigator, Baren.

"Can you compensate?" asked Jennera.

"Impossible. Main power is almost depleted. Our only option is to reduce speed and divert warp power to shields." Baren replied.

"No. Continue present speed. We have to get out of the Neutral Zone as quickly as possible."

"As you say, Commander."

Jennera made her way to the still functioning Ops station. Bringing up a damage report, her thoughts grew more dismal. Weapons out, cloaking device disabled, life support at minimal.

Presently, they were scheduled to reach Federation space in under one hour. Their pursuers were stopping at nothing to ensure her failure. Her thoughts were interrupted as another blast slammed the ship's engines.

"We've lost aft shields," the panic in Baren's voice was barely perceptible. "Attempting to compensate."

But it was too late. Their pursuer fired the fatal shot. The Ops panel exploded in a flash of sparks barely missing Jennera's head.

Moving swiftly to the communications panel, she flipped a series of switches somewhat hesitantly, and began the distress call.

Captain's Log: Stardate 3221.06

The Enterprise is en route to the Kohinoor system near the Neutral Zone. Starfleet reports have indicated possible Romulan activity in that sector for the past two days. As there are no obvious targets or points of interest in that area of space, we have been sent to investigate and report back to Starbase 13.

Sitting tensely in his command chair, Captain James T. Kirk looked to the ship's chronometer. As expected, they arrived at their destination on time.

"Coming to assigned coordinates, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Stiles. Mr. Sulu, full stop." Kirk glanced over at Spock who was leaning intently over his station, peering into his raised monitor. "Mr. Spock, report."

"Curious. Sensors detect two vessels, both Romulan Bird Of Prey Class. One seems to be disabled. Warp coils off-line, low power levels throughout the ship. Three lifesigns aboard, all Romulan. The other vessel is approach-"

"Captain," it was Uhura. "Excuse me, sir, but we have a distress call originating from one of the Romulan vessels. Audio only."

"Let's hear it, Lieutenant." Kirk ordered.

"Aye, sir. Audio on."

"...Romulan vessel *Charbarus*...need assistance...warp engines destroyed, life support depleted...crew needs medical assistance. This is the Romulan vessel *Charbarus*, we-". The message abruptly ended and Kirk quickly turned to Uhura.

"Signal apparently being blocked from the source, sir." She explained almost apologetically.

Kirk leaned forward in his chair. *Two Romulan vessels, one disabled and the other...* "Mr. Spock, what about the second ship?" he asked.

"The second vessel is rapidly closing on the *Charbarus*," Spock began. "It is possible the vessel is assisting. However, it is also plausible the second ship was the source of the molecular implosion field detected earlier."

"Are you saying the Romulans are firing on their own people?" asked Kirk.

"It is only a theory, Captain. Nevertheless, current evidence seems to point to that conclusion." Spock answered.

Objectively, this seemed like an internal affair in which Kirk should not risk his crew. Assisting the *Charbarus* may cause new difficulties with the Romulan Empire, but as Starfleet officers, they could not turn their back on a distress call.

"Plot a course to those vessels, Mr. Stiles. Mr. Sulu, ahead Warp One."

"Warp One, aye." Sulu said.

"Sir, do you want to respond to the distress call?" asked Uhura from her station.

"No, Lieutenant," Kirk began. "I want to see what we're getting into before we make any commitments. There may be more to this than we presently know."

"Aye, sir." Uhura replied.

"Mr. Stiles, arm all phasers and photon torpedoes," Kirk ordered.

The navigator complied swiftly. "Done, sir."

Kirk punched the intercom button on the arm of his chair. "This is the Captain. All decks, Red Alert, I repeat, all decks, Red Alert. The *Enterprise* is now entering the Neutral Zone. Again, all decks, Red Alert..."

Sulu squinted into his tactical viewer as he hastily flipped switches on his console. He noticed something alarming, but not unfamiliar, on his screen. He spun to face the Captain. "Sir, the second vessel has vanished from sensors."

Kirk rose from his chair and walked down to the helm. He pulled the viewer to his eyes.

He continued to stare into the screen as Sulu again manipulated the sensor controls. And again, they came to the same conclusions. "They've spotted us and cloaked. Slow to one half impulse, Mr. Sulu," he ordered.

"Aye, sir, slowing to one half impulse," Sulu said.

Kirk walked over to the science station. "Any change on the *Charbarus*, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

"Life support has dropped below minimal standards," Spock announced.

"However life signs have not changed. The vessel itself does exhibit signs of definite battle damage. Local debris displays traces of molecular implosion."

"She was attacked," Kirk stated bluntly.

Spock nodded slowly. "No other explanation is apparent at this stage, Captain."

"Could it have been the second Bird Of Prey?"

"Long range sensors show no sign of any other vessels in the area, therefore, that is the strongest possibility."

"And it's a good bet we're their next target."

"Probable, Captain," Spock answered. "If this is an internal matter, which I suspect it is, the Romulans would not want the Federation alerted to the situation. Although the vessel could have chosen any number of courses, it is more likely they are preparing to attack. Hence, the activation of the cloaking device."

"We have to get our hands on that thing one of these days," Kirk commented.

"Agreed," Spock said.

From behind them, Uhura leaned forward abruptly in her chair. "Captain, the distress call is no longer being blocked. Picking it up again on audio."

Kirk walked over to the communications station. "Open a channel." She indicated it was open and Kirk looked to the main screen. "*Charbarus*, this is the Federation vessel *Enterprise*. What is your present condition?"

The static ridden response was barely perceptible. "*Enterprise*...vessel was attacked...most of the crew dead...life support diminished...need assistance...*please*."

"Stand by, *Charbarus*," Kirk walked down to his chair and hit a button on the arm. "Bridge to Transporter Room."

"Transporter Room. Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, there's a crippled Romulan Bird Of Prey out there with no life support. Can you get a lock on the crew and beam them out?"

In the transporter room, Scotty attempted to get a fix on the life signs in the *Charbarus*. "Radiation levels on the ship'll make it difficult. The bridge seems the best area for transport."

"Stand by, Mr. Scott," Kirk ordered. He began considering the risk he was about to take. Their shields would have to be lowered during the transport process. With a cloaked Romulan vessel in the vicinity, it was not the preferable course of action. *It wouldn't be the first time and it won't be the last*. He nodded his head to Uhura who reopened the channel. "*Charbarus*, we can transport your crew to the *Enterprise* if you can gather everyone on your bridge."

A short moment of empty static followed. "Give us five of your minutes, *Enterprise*," the voice acknowledged.

"Five minutes. *Enterprise* out," Kirk responded as Uhura severed the connection. "Uhura, call security. I want three men in the Transporter Room."

Kirk turned back to the intercom and pressed another button. "Bridge to Sickbay."

"Sickbay. McCoy here."

"Bones, we're beaming aboard a Romulan crew of three. Possible radiation exposure. Be in the transporter room in five minutes."

"Romulans?" McCoy said in mock amazement. "I have enough trouble with one pointy eared Vulcan."

"You'll manage, Doctor. Bridge out." He looked back at the viewscreen. *Now for our next trick*, he thought. "Any sign of that second vessel, Mr. Sulu?" he asked.

"None, sir," answered the helmsman.

"Keep scanning, I don't want any surprise appearances," Kirk ordered. "Mr. Stiles, plot a course for Starbase 13."

"Course plotted and laid in, sir," Stiles responded.

"Mr. Sulu, as soon as we get our visitors take us out of here Warp Five." Kirk commanded.

"Warp Five, aye."

And they waited.

As the ship's chronometer indicated that five minutes was almost over, Kirk rose from his command chair to walk to the helm. He suspected the captain of the cloaked vessel was probably waiting for something. Else he would have attacked by now. No, if they could jam the *Charbarus's* communications they could probably tap into them as well. Their captain is waiting for the *Enterprise* to drop shields for transport. "Report, Mr. Sulu."

"No sign of the second vessel yet, sir." Sulu announced with an intense, waiting stare at the captain.

"I expect they'll attack the minute we drop shields. After we beam our guests aboard, raise the shields and get us out of here *fast*."

"Understood, sir." Sulu replied.

Kirk moved to stand beside his command chair and pushed a button on its arm. "Bridge to transporter room."

"Transporter room, Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, how fast can we get these people aboard? I don't want shields down any longer than necessary."

"It'll take a little longer wi' the bloody high radiation levels," the engineer admitted. "But we're already locked onto their bridge. I'd say about thirty seconds maximum."

"You have fifteen seconds, Mr. Scott. Energize on my mark."

Kirk left the comm channel open and could hear McCoy and his medical team arrive in the transporter room decks below. McCoy's voice sounded husky as he spoke. "Where's the party, Jim?"

"Starting soon, Bones." Kirk responded.

Just then, the *Charbarus's* message broke in abruptly. Uhura put it on audio again so that the bridge crew and Engineering could listen.

"We are ready for transport, *Enterprise*," announced the weary voice of the female commander.

"Acknowledged, *Charbarus*," Kirk replied. "Beginning transport, *now*."

Kirk watched as Sulu lowered the shields. "Now, Mr. Scott!", he ordered as his eyes snapped up to look at the viewscreen. Sure enough, the second Romulan Bird Of Prey began decloaking and heading straight for the *Enterprise*.

"Scotty, *report*!" Kirk yelled over the intercom as the automatic red alert klaxons blasted through the ship.

Suddenly, a voice shouted over the intercom. "We got 'em, Captain!" Scotty's announcement was followed by McCoy's voice barking orders at his medics.

"Shields!" Kirk commanded. "Fire, Mr. Stiles!"

As the *Enterprise's* phasers shot out, the attacking Bird Of Prey cloaked immediately. The beams contacted the derelict *Charbarus* in a sun burst explosion. Debris scattered in all directions. *A clean miss*, Kirk thought angrily. There was no sign of their attacker, as if the destruction of the *Charbarus* caused it to be distracted. Kirk took the opportunity while he had it.

"Helm, full reverse, warp five. Get us out of the Neutral Zone."

"Full reverse, aye," announced Sulu.

All eyes were fixed on the viewscreen to see if their attackers would follow. Once they were out of the Zone, Kirk ordered full stop. "Report, Mr. Sulu."

"Sensors indicate no sign of the other Bird Of Prey, Captain. We have warp capabilities, but only up to warp six. Impulse engine are functioning."

"Excellent, Mr. Sulu, take us out of here warp six."

"Warp six, aye," complied the helmsman.

As the *Enterprise* turned to set out on her new course, Kirk turned back to the intercom. "Kirk to Transporter Room, report."

"We have three survivors, Captain," Scotty reported. "Dr. McCoy rushed them to Sickbay with security."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. Good work, you've earned your pay. Kirk out." He punched off the intercom and turned to the science station.

"Mr. Spock, would you like to join me in Sickbay?" Kirk asked. He knew the Vulcan would be extremely curious about the Romulans.

"I would indeed, Captain," Spock replied as he walked, rather hastily, toward the turbolift with Kirk.

With a grin hardly noticeable, Kirk informed Spock that he knew the Vulcan would say that. Spock retorted with a raised eyebrow as the turbolift doors closed.

Hours later, in the briefing room, Kirk and Spock sat in anticipation. Earlier, the two had gone to Sickbay to check on the condition of the Romulans, but McCoy would not allow any questioning while he treated his patients.

Now, three burly security officers escorted McCoy and the two Romulan officers into the briefing room.

The commander was tall and slender, with high cheekbones, emerald green eyes, and long brown hair. She kept an air of confidence and energy about her as she slowly sat down at the

conference table, head held high. One of the security officers took up position along the wall directly behind her chair.

The other Romulan, a male, sat two seats down from his commander, and continued looking over his shoulder at the guard who stood behind his chair. Finally, he just folded his hands atop the table and stared at them solemnly.

McCoy took a seat at the table opposite Kirk. The third security officer stood just inside the door. Spock sat a computer console at the end of the table, inserting a cartridge onto which this meeting would be recorded.

Kirk looked over at the commander who returned his gaze resolutely. "I'm Captain James T. Kirk," he informed her. "This is my first officer, Mr. Spock." He indicated the Vulcan at the computer console who spoke up impassively.

"Please state your names and ranks for the record," Spock ordered.

The commander spoke in a hoarse but audible voice. "I am Commander Jennera of the Romulan Empire." She said no more as she looked over to Baren who looked back at her then quickly over to Spock. "I am Centurion Baren, serving under Commander Jennera." He spoke quickly, nervously.

"Commander, would you please explain why you were in the Neutral Zone?" inquired Kirk.

"We were attempting to reach Federation space," Jennera replied matter-of-factly, as if this one sentence would explain everything. As expected, it did not although it caused a lot of glances to dart around the room.

Without missing a beat, Spock continued the questioning. "May I ask why you were attempting to do this?"

"We were, and still are, attempting to defect."

"What prompted this decision, Commander?" Kirk asked. Never mind Spock, his own curiosity was growing.

Jennera looked down at the table for an instant before answering. "My husband, Novan, was a senator in our government," she began. "He was rather outspoken about his ideas of peace with the Federation. Once, during a senate conference, he went so far as to announce his ideas about reuniting with our Vulcan cousins."

A look of more than mild surprise, if that was possible, crossed Spock's face. "Such an undertaking would be rather massive and would mean taking great steps toward a compromise that I doubt your government would favor."

"You are correct, Mr. Spock. They did not favor it." Jennera's voice began to take on a darker tone. "Some of his fellow senators, even those he called his friends, began to turn on him. They denounced his ideas first as irrational and insane."

"It wasn't long before news of my husband's activities reached the Praetor through Romulan Intelligence. He ordered my husband arrested for treason."

Closing her eyes for a moment to hold her composure, she continued. "He was imprisoned for three days without food or water. When the day finally came for his execution, it was decided that it would be a public spectacle as an example to others who supported him. They brought him to the middle of a courtyard in one of our government buildings. His hands were tied behind his back, and he could not even raise his head. The soldiers pushed him to his knees, fired three disrupters at the back of his head. He died instantly."

"My God," McCoy whispered. He did not realize how tense he had become listening to Jennera's story. It was an effort just to sit back in his chair and exhale.

After the briefing, security escorted the Romulans to their quarters leaving Kirk, Spock, and McCoy to ponder their fate.

McCoy was the first to break the silence. "What do you think Starfleet will do with them, Jim?"

Kirk leaned forward in his chair and rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I don't know, Bones. I'm sure Intelligence will want to question them first. Maybe they'll put them on a colony somewhere."

Spock looked over at Kirk but hesitated a moment before speaking. "With your permission, Captain, I would like to contact the Vulcan ambassador and request sanctuary for them on Vulcan. He and I are...familiar with each other. And I hope he will see my logic."

"Permission granted, Mr. Spock," Kirk said. "May I ask why you want to do this?"

"I, too, have considered the possibility of peace between my people and the Romulans. Although such an undertaking would prove extremely difficult, it can be attained with enough support. Perhaps not now, but in the near future, I would be prepared to assist in accomplishing this goal, especially now that I know there are others on the Romulan homeworld who feel the same."

McCoy was about to comment on Spock's use of the word "feel" but decided against it. He was very impressed with the Vulcan's compassion for the Romulans they rescued today. "As you are so fond of saying, Spock, there are always possibilities," he said instead.



I've always known . . .

I didn't know where the feeling came from, only that one moment I was quietly waiting my turn to speak and the next, I was filled with shaking dread.

Something . . . awful had happened.

The faces in the crowd before me blurred but no one else seemed to realize . . . only me. For a moment, I thought I was dying.

A sound nearby brought my reeling senses back into focus, an inhuman groan which I recognized instantly.

Spock.

A moment before he had been addressing thousands of beings, now he was on his knees, his face hidden in trembling hands, yet I knew the familiar features were twisted in agony not his own.

I stumbled to his side, my movements sluggish with my own pain. All sounds faded and I didn't know if I even spoke aloud.

"Spock?"

*Tears - his, mine, ours - flowed from distraught eyes.
He reached out blindly to me, his words a hoarse whisper.
"Jim was alone. We left him alone."*

"No, dammit, he was with Scotty and Chekov," I choked out, "the christening cruise for the new Enterprise. There was no danger."

*"He is no longer a part of this universe, McCoy."
The response was harsh, full of anger that I refused to believe his words.
Or my own senses.*

The faces around us, the huge audience, time itself, ceased to exist as I looked into those eyes which mirrored my own devastation.

And understood finally that Jim was gone.

. . . I'll die alone.

--Lynn Syck & Mary Rottler

STAR TREK VOYAGER

The Storm

by Karen Donnelly

"I can't stabilize our descent!" Paris yelled. "We're out of control!"

Torres scarcely heard him above the noise of the plasma storm around them and the protests of the shuttle's engines as they tried to respond to the commands Paris was almost madly punching. The information, however, was unnecessary. Both she and Kes knew very well what was happening. The small craft was no match for the fury that raged around them, and they were thrown sharply about in their seats as the shuttle pitched wildly.

"Brace for impact!"

The roiling clouds of plasma suddenly parted, and the ground came up to meet them. The shuttle plowed into the tall vegetation, then through to the surface beneath. It dug a long, brown furrow into the ground as it hit and then slid a quarter kilometer. Now with no power, the automatic restraints were useless. The force of the impact tore the rear hatch from the hull and ejected Torres into a bank of scrubby plant growth to the left of the crash path. Inside, Paris and Kes were rag dolls bouncing off panels and walls. Fortunately, neither knew anything nor felt any of the pain after the first few jarring blows. Nor did they know that they were now stranded on the primitive Class M planet with a demolished shuttle and no hope of rescue while the storm still raged.

Kes heard her father calling her to come to him from far away. Was it time for dinner already? No. Wait. Her father was dead; he had been dead since she was a year old. Who was calling her? What did he want? "Kes? Kes!" She forced her eyes open and through a slight blur saw Lieutenant Tom Paris standing over her. He looked as if he had been in an accident, his face bloodied, and his black and red Starfleet uniform torn on one sleeve. Oh, yes--now she remembered. They had crashed after encountering a sudden plasma storm that had rendered their sensors, instruments, and finally their controls useless.

Kes tried to raise herself slowly and encountered pain. Her sharp intake of breath alarmed Paris, and he urged her not to move. "Good. You're alive," he panted with characteristic understatement. "Just lie still and try to gather your wits. Are you hurt badly?"

The slender, blonde Ocampan tried to quiet her breathing and took stock of her condition as her Vulcan mentor, Tuvok, had taught her. Amazingly, she could sense no broken bones--just very bad bruises and many cuts, mostly small ones. She was in no immediate danger. "I'm just shaken up mostly. You?"

"I probably look like hell, but I'm still in one piece. Can't say the same for the shuttle,

though. Try to relax. I have to find B'Elanna. The storm has let up a little, and I think I can go outside now." His voice was even, but he feared what he would find. Patting Kes' hand, he started for the gaping hole that had once been the back of the small craft. He stepped outside into the remains of the storm.

Paris held up his right hand to shield his eyes as best he could from the blowing fronds and twigs. He was thankful that at least there was no rain associated with plasma storms, and the temperature was comfortable. He looked around slowly and called out.

"B'Elanna? B'Elanna, can you hear me? Damn it, Torres! Where are you?"

He began walking slowly to his right around the wreckage. The underbrush here was not particularly dense, so he ought to be able to see Torres if she were near. He saw nothing. When he circled around to his starting point, he then set out along the path of destruction the shuttlecraft had made through the forest. He realized his friend probably could not hear him through the wind, so he did not call out to her again.

About sixty meters from where Paris set out, he saw a splash of gold among the gray/brown and green just up ahead. His pace quickened. So did his pulse. The color was not moving. If it were Torres, she was lying very still. Squatting near the place, he was almost blown sideways to the ground by a sudden gust. He regained his balance and began frantically to move aside the branches and other plant debris that covered the form beneath. It was indeed his half-human, half-Klingon friend. His hands swept faster.

"B'Elanna!" he screamed. She didn't answer.

Paris did not know Kes had followed him until she knelt beside him and began to help. When at last they could see Torres' head and upper body, Kes' fingers shot to the neck of the semi-prone figure. There was a faint pulse, but without a medical tricorder or scanner, Paris knew there was no way for Kes to accurately assess Torres' condition. Besides, it looked to him as if she had needed all the strength she still had to get just herself this far.

"She's still alive," Kes said. "Don't move her until I see if she has any obvious injuries that we might make worse." Carefully and slowly she felt what she could reach of her friend's body.

"Hold her neck still while I try to turn her over," she instructed. They rolled her off an obviously a broken arm, but there appeared to be no other injuries to the torso or limbs. The expected cuts and scratches and a darkly discolored lump just below the second forehead ridge on the right side were all they found. The lump told them why Torres was still unconscious.

"Can we carry her back to the shuttle?" Kes asked.

"*You* won't carry anything," Paris replied, "but *I* can." Being careful not to jostle Torres' head and neck any more than necessary, he lifted her gently and turned back the way they had come. Kes took a position near Torres' head, trying to shield her from the blowing detritus. It seemed the storm was settling down a little more.

Paris threw down the console module he had been working on and made a sound of disgust. "It's no use! There is no power to anything anywhere, no way to restore it, and even if your com badge works, we can't raise *Voyager* through the interference." His own badge had been torn from his uniform during the crash and obliterated by a falling control panel. They had

not been able to find the one that had belonged to Torres. Kes' belief that the storm was abating had been short lived. Although not as intense as when they had crashed, it had gotten stronger since they arrived back at the shuttle. Paris wedged one of the long bench seats from the back of the craft against the opening where the hatch had been, then added panels from the bulkhead and consoles to form a windbreak that at least sheltered them from the worst of the storm. Now he was trying in vain to figure out some way to call for help. He had to let the Captain know they were alive and where they were. Even if the ship's instruments had been able to read the storm, the sensors couldn't punch through enough of the interference to scan for them. Their only clue that the shuttle was in trouble would have been the sudden inability to communicate with it. Paris was not used to feeling this helpless.

While he had worked at the useless task, Kes had tended to Torres' wounds. She had set the broken arm using thin but strong pieces of wreckage to fashion a splint, then washed and disinfected the cuts. The dermal regenerator had been knocked from her med kit and crushed in the accident, and most of the rest of her meager store of emergency equipment had suffered the same fate. The make-shift first aid would have to do for now. If the *Voyager's* crew functioned with their usual efficiency, they would find their stranded crewmates soon. There was no point thinking about any other possibility. Kes treated Paris' wounds next, despite his non-too-polite protests, and lastly tended her own.

Torres had regained consciousness in a typically foul Klingon mood, and it had taken all of Paris' strength to subdue her, broken arm notwithstanding. He had silently thanked each god in the Klingon pantheon, and even Kahless himself, that his friend had been at least weakened from her ordeal. She had finally given up, or simply given *out*, and now sat propped against a mostly-intact wall. Kes was telling her what had happened and was trying with commendable success to keep the agitated patient quiet.

Hours passed. Torres had finally fallen into a fitful sleep after Kes kept her awake long enough to be relatively certain she would not lapse again into unconsciousness from her head wound. Outside the light faded, even as the storm seemed once again to ease. Night crept in, and Paris gathered enough woody deadfall to build a small fire with their one remaining operative phaser. He did so more for light than for warmth since the temperature hadn't fallen significantly as darkness encroached. The problem was that in order to be near the fire outside, they had had to unblock the opening, leaving the inside of the shuttle unprotected. They decided to move out near the crackling flames for a while longer and then return to the dark interior and barricade the opening.

"How long do you think it will take the ship to find us?" Kes asked when at last they rose to leave the dying fire.

"I don't know," Paris answered honestly. "I just don't know." They climbed back inside, re-built the barrier, and said no more.

Captain Kathryn Janeway should have left the bridge hours ago, but her guilt would not let her. She had made the decision and given the order to send down a landing party on too little information. The initial sensor sweep of the planet had given them too little, as though the system were malfunctioning. It had briefly shown a Class M planet but could not positively identify

several life forms. At one point, Ensign Harry Kim had thought he read *human* life forms, but seconds later they vanished. In fact, all his detail readouts had fluctuated randomly throughout the sweep. Normally that would have been enough for the Captain to decide to leave the planet unexplored, but the fluctuations kept showing again and again the presence of both a large deposit of tellerium ore needed for maintenance in the warp system and one of duranium. Since no variations of the readings showed technology or even sentient life forms (those human readings had disappeared too quickly to have been real), her duty to keep her ship going had overcome her reluctance to send crew members into an unknown situation. She had ordered her best pilot, her most analytical engineer, and Kes to the surface.

Neelix, Kes' Talaxian lover, self-appointed morale officer, and ship's cook, paced quietly behind the Captain's chair. He had argued that he should have been the third crewman on the shuttle; one never knew when new edible plants might be found. But Janeway had sent Kes. The Captain better trusted Kes' judgement and biological analysis skills. And she had medical training. Perhaps that had been some sort of premonition, but there was no use trying to second-guess that now. What they needed to do was figure out why communications had been cut off. She needed to find her people. She needed to know if she had ordered them into the jaws of hell. Except for the sounds coming from Harry's console as he tried to adjust and recalibrate everything there was to manipulate in the system, the bridge was silent. Janeway was not reassured by that.

"Mr. Kim," she said for the fourth time that hour, "have you had any luck yet?"

"No, Ma'am," he replied with an exhausted sigh. "After the readings settled down a couple of hours ago, they have remained about the same, fluctuations and all." His Captain silently ignored the impreciseness of his answer. She knew he was doing the best he could--admirably in fact, considering how long he had been at the frustrating task. "It sure would be easier to do this if B'Elanna were here."

"I'm sure it would, Mr. Kim. Keep at it." Janeway turned to glance at her first officer. Commander Chakotay sat very still, his head tilted slightly to one side, a thumbnail absently tapping his teeth. He, too, was worried about the three young crewmen somewhere on the planet below them, but he had said little. His continued presence on the bridge was his statement. Janeway sighed and continued to wait.

Paris heard the sound of movement behind him and turned in its direction. Kes was stirring from sleep, and her movements had awakened Torres as well.

"Good morning, ladies," he said. "All is well."

"Cut the crap, Paris," Torres answered. She struggled slowly to her feet, cradling her broken right arm in her left hand and biting back a groan. She looked at the destruction around her, seeing it from an upright position for the first time. The two front seats had been torn from their moorings, and Paris had not bothered to reassemble the useless consoles. Panels and gray padding from the interior walls had been torn loose or badly mangled. It was obvious that they wouldn't be going anywhere in this particular craft. She sighed. "Is there anything to eat around here?"

Paris looked at her and at then at Kes, who had also risen to her feet and was attempting

to stretch her aching body. "There are enough emergency rations for one more meal," he said, "but our first order of business today will have to be finding food and water." He neglected to add that they also would need to find a place to construct a more-intact shelter if *Voyager* did not rescue them soon.

"With all of this vegetation there must be a source of water somewhere near," Kes reasoned. "But without an operating tricorder, I won't be able to tell which plants are safe for us to eat. Maybe some of those life forms the ship picked up are small enough for us to hunt."

Paris looked at her for a long moment. "*You*, Kes, are suggesting that we kill and eat small, furry creatures?" he asked in amazement.

"We have no idea how small or furry any of the native life forms are, and we will have to have some food source soon. Animal life forms are much less likely to be harmful if ingested than are untested forms of plant life."

Paris shook his head. He had come to the same conclusion himself during his late watch, but he somehow hadn't expected to hear such unimpassioned practicality from the gentle Kes.

Torres let out a heavy breath. "Well, let's get to it," she said, walking toward the barricade. "It sounds as if the storm is over. Maybe we'll be rescued before we have to kill any of those small furry things." There seemed to be a faint note of disappointment in her voice.

Paris and Kes removed most of the material blocking the entrance to the shuttle. Torres helped where she could, and the other two dared not suggest that she stop. They stepped out into hazy light as though they were under cloud cover. All three looked upward at the same time; their hope faded at once. Above them, twisting and turning like animated gray cotton candy, was the plasma storm. It had not ended--it had just moved to sufficient altitude that it was not affecting the planet surface, at least in their immediate area. "Let's go," Paris said, barely able to hide the disappointment he felt.

They walked slowly and carefully through the sparse underbrush, small bushes with triangular green leaves and young trees with brown bark and oval foliage. The mature trees making up the rest of the forest were mostly the same sort, the tallest about twenty meters. They kept alert for life forms. Paris held the phaser in his hand, more ready for defense than game hunting. They had walked about two kilometers from the shuttle when Kes suddenly jerked her head to the right.

"I think I hear water," she said. Turning in the direction Kes indicated, they picked up their pace.

About a hundred meters along, the three crewmen came to a narrow stream bed cut into the forest floor. Smooth pebbles lined the bottom, under clear-flowing water. Paris pushed ahead of the two women and knelt on the bank. Ignoring a warning call from Kes, he plunged his hands into the cool water and bent over to cup some to his lips. He tasted it carefully but could detect nothing out of the ordinary. "I think it's OK," he called to the others.

"I hope so," said Kes cautiously, joining him on the bank. "If it isn't, you may have done something very rash, not to mention against training and regulations."

"We don't have time to worry about that," Torres argued testily. "Our first job is to survive, and we need water for that. Without it, it won't really matter, will it?"

Reluctantly, Kes knelt beside Paris and filled the few undamaged containers they had brought with them. Only then did she raise a handful to her lips, sniffing it for a moment before she drank it. Rising to her feet, she handed a container to Torres, who drank eagerly. Kes refilled

the container and drank again from the stream.

"Looks like the trees thin out a little here," Paris said. He was looking across the stream to where the ground gently sloped upward. "Let's see if we can find a clear place and take another look at the sky." If the storm had lasted this long, it must be larger than any he had ever heard about. He needed to know what he and his shipmates were facing.

One by one they stepped over the narrow cut and walked on. The forest was indeed thinner there, and the ground was firmer under their feet. At the top of the small rise, they could see brightness ahead of them--and steeper hills. They trudged on, Torres bringing up the rear but not slowing down the little party. Paris knew his friend must be in pain. What mild analgesics Kes had been able to administer from the remains of the med kit would have worn off by now. Just as certainly, he knew that Torres would not complain. Worse than pain from a broken arm could be facing them soon.

The wooded area ended just before they started up a long rise and was replaced by long-bladed grass. Their spirits dropped as they looked up and saw rolling masses of gray as far as the eye could see. Paris continued to the top of the hill and looked over. For a moment he stood perfectly still. Suddenly he pivoted around toward the others.

"Kes! B'Elanna!" he called. "Get up here! Now!" Obviously alarmed by the insistence they heard in his voice, the two women seemed to forget their aching bodies and hurried up the hill to where he stood. He extended his arm and pointed ahead and just to the right. At first, all Kes and Torres saw was a mountain range, purple in the distance, with its tops reaching up almost to the bottom of the plasma clouds. They seemed puzzled by his urgency. Then they saw what he was really pointing to. It was not the mountains or the clouds, but something closer, not half a kilometer away.

There, on the other side of a small valley formed between the hill where they stood and a taller, rockier one on the other side, nestled against the base of the other mound, almost as if for protection, was the wreck of a starship.

The turbolift doors opened to let Captain Janeway onto the bridge. The four hours of rest she had allowed herself did not show. Approaching Kim's station, she stopped with hands on her hips. Beside the young ensign stood Commander Chakotay, staring at the readouts on the screen. Her Executive Officer looked as bad as she felt. Despite the obvious exhaustion on his face, Janeway thought she saw something else.

"Any progress?" she asked.

Tired eyes looked up at her. Harry had left the bridge for only a few hours when he could no longer focus on the panels before him. Ensign McFarlane had taken his place, but there had been little for her to do. Before he left, Harry initiated a pattern recognition program to follow the fifth diagnostic he had run, just to make sure he was not overlooking some minor malfunction that might be causing their problems. Tuvok had supervised all of this while adjusting instruments and searching computer files for something--for *anything*--that might help them. The diagnostic had shown nothing, but Kim was pointing to the scrolling figures the First Officer was reading.

"We haven't been able to clear up the scans yet, and they're still fluctuating, but I may have found something else." The Captain moved closer. Now Chakotay's hand also pointed, and

he touched a pad with his other hand to stop the moving information.

"There's a pattern to the sensor fluctuations," Chakotay said. "It wasn't obvious at first because the readings seemed so confused and vague. But there's definitely a pattern to them. Look."

The Captain stared closely at the row of figures where he was pointing. "Yes," she said slowly. "I see it. It's almost like there's something pulsing at long intervals, something our instruments can't quite read." Her head jerked up suddenly, and she saw Chakotay's surprised face looking hard back at her.

"Can't quite read. . . ," Kim said slowly, voicing what his two superior officers had already realized. "Plasma storm?"

"Yes," the Captain said again. "That would explain a great deal, wouldn't it?" All too well she and Chakotay remembered the plasma storm on the planet where they had been left after they contracted an alien virus from an insect bite. That storm had been enormously destructive but had not been readable. "The question now is how do we use that information to get our people back?"

Kim and Chakotay sighed in unison. "We're still working on that part, Captain," Kim said.

"It's duranium, all right," said Paris, squatting in the dirt and looking carefully at the piece of hull before him. "That narrows the possibilities of where this came from."

"OK, OK!" Torres growled. "Enough of this! Why can't we go in now?" After a quick circuit of the wrecked ship, they had discovered a hatch leading into what appeared to be an intact section of the hull. The pieces of the ship looked to have been there a long time, so Paris doubted that anything inside still worked. Torres, however, hadn't been quite so sure and was growing more and more agitated that Paris refused to let her go in and check things out. She was more than just agitated; she was frustrated that they were still here, and working on anything--even on old, non-functioning alien equipment--would make her feel that they were at least *trying* to help themselves.

On the other side of what they thought had been the cargo section of the ship, Kes was very quiet. Every so often she would touch the gray metallic skin in front of her as though she expected to feel a pulse. She occasionally brushed dirt from it almost lovingly. Suddenly she stopped and began to wipe off the area in front of her. She picked up a small branch which still had oval green leaves on it and used that as a scrub brush. After she had "brushed" an area about a meter and a half square, she backed up and stared at the now-clean spot, open-mouthed.

"No," her voice quivered in disbelief. "This can't be real."

"Kes?" Torres called, coming into Kes' field of vision. "Tom thinks it's OK now to. . . ." She stopped in mid sentence when she saw the Ocampo's incredulous stare. Following Kes' eyes to the wreckage, Torres gasped. Scratched, faded, and previously unreadable under the dust that had once clung there was now visible, "USS *Richard Zane* NCC-518. . ." The rest had been burned off in the fiery crash. "My God!" she whispered.

* * *

Paris stood silently beside Kes for several minutes. She had somewhat regained her composure but was still shaken. Torres paced behind them.

"So how did it get here?" she asked. "It's clearly a Starfleet ship, but I don't see how this could have happened."

Paris turned to her. "Something similar to what happened to us would be my guess. The *Zane* disappeared about twenty years ago if I remember my Starfleet History course right. They probably encountered a wormhole or some kind of spatial anomaly that brought them here. Of course, the Caretaker could have been responsible." He absently brushed dust from his hands and placed them on his hips. "Now we know *Voyager* isn't the first Federation ship in this quadrant. Not much comfort, is it?"

"Tom, I think we should find shelter." Kes gazed upward, a note of urgency in her voice. Both Paris and Torres looked up to see that the gray clouds above them were moving faster and dropping lower.

"Oh, hell!" Paris groaned. "We'll never make it back to the shuttle in time!"

"Don't be stupid!" Torres hissed. "I wanted to go inside an hour ago; now we have a reason." Without waiting for Paris to reply, she strode off around the wreck towards where they had found the hatch. The wind began to rise sharply, blowing dirt and small pebbles around them in swirls that would soon become torrents. Paris snatched up the water containers, and he and Kes followed Torres without objection.

When the two of them reached the other side, Torres was already forcing open the hatch. It moved with unexpected ease. She expected a rush of foul air, but only a slightly stale odor met her sensitive nostrils. There was no smell of death or decay that she could detect. She stepped quickly inside with the others close behind her. They turned to help her shut the hatch, but she slammed it effortlessly.

They expected to be in darkness once the hatch was closed since this section of the ship was more or less intact, and they were surprised to find they could see one another's faces in a pale, greenish glow that surrounded them.

"I'm not sure I like this," Paris said, looking around for the first time. "The hatch opened too easily, and now we find light in here."

Kes moved a few steps away from Paris and Torres and reached out to touch the interior wall. "Kes, stay with us," Paris warned. She seemed to pay no attention, drawing back her hand and looking at the two fingers that had come in contact with the bulkhead. They glowed dimly with the same greenish tint as the walls.

"The light appears to be coming from some kind of moss or fungus growing on the walls," she said. She wiped her fingers on her tunic, leaving a faintly glowing trail. She brought her head up and looked around. "It isn't growing everywhere, though, just in large spots. I don't understand how it could have gotten into a closed space like this. And why doesn't the air smell worse? If there were food or . . . other things. . . decomposing in here for years, it should."

Torres interrupted her. "I wondered that, too, when I opened the hatch. This section doesn't seem to be breached, yet it certainly doesn't look--or smell--like it's been closed for years."

Paris was beginning to feel an uneasy crawling sensation start at the base of his spine and travel to his hairline. His eyes were adjusting to the dim illumination, and he turned slightly to take in his surroundings more carefully. As he did so, his boots made a scraping sound on the

floor. There was dirt underneath his soles, more than could have blown in during the short time they had held open the hatch. He took several slow steps away from the women. He could now see the glowing segments Kes had seen, and more besides. The compartment was large, perhaps thirty meters across to the bulkhead opposite. The wall to his left was about ten meters away. Between where he stood and that wall were about fifteen large storage barrels, some knocked over and damaged as could be expected. But ten or so of them, though dented and scraped, were standing upright. He whirled around to face his companions.

"Someone survived this crash!" he breathed. What if. . ." He never finished his sentence. Instead, he stared past Kes and Torres, now turned to face their entry point. All of them stood very still as the hatch began to slide open

Chakotay closed his eyes and rubbed the lids with his right forefinger and thumb. They felt as though he were in a desert sandstorm instead of on a starship surrounded by constantly filtered air. He lowered his hand to the console and opened his eyes slowly, allowing them time to adjust to vision again and to focus. The first thing he saw was the back of the Captain's head. It seemed to be drooping tiredly forward a little. He was not surprised.

He took a deep breath and redirected his attention once more to the readouts. What Tuvok had gleaned from the results of Harry's pattern recognition indicated that whatever was down there causing the interference was practically planet-wide. Now and again when the sensors seemed to be getting recognizable readings, it seemed to be because the interference thinned out momentarily. Just as quickly, the readings would fluctuate into nonsense again as though the "thin spot" were being covered over.

"Mr. Kim." The Ensign's head snapped up abruptly at the shock of his First Officer's voice breaking the silence of the bridge. Chakotay wondered if Harry had fallen asleep standing up. Why not? He had done the same thing himself several times now as his mind had simply refused to function any longer without a brief respite. He looked at the young man as though he had noticed nothing.

"Reconfigure the pattern recognition program to plot time and location intervals of the fluctuations it has already recognized. Let's see if we can predict when and where the storm will 'thin.' Then let's see if we can establish how long those thin spots will last."

"Yes, Sir," Harry answered. His fingers began to move over the touch pads on the console.

Chakotay glanced again at the back of Captain Janeway's head. It came upright for a moment, taking in the short conversation behind her, and once more drooped slightly as she continued to stare at the padd in her lap.

Howling wind forced its way through the opening as it widened, blowing dirt and swirling plant debris in with it in a blinding cloud. Her broken arm temporarily forgotten, Torres crouched in an instinctive defensive pose, ready to protect her friends from whatever was advancing on them. A growl escaped her throat, but it was lost in the sound of the wind. Paris drew his phaser

and pointed it at the hatch-high tornado. A figure, head bowed against the storm's rising fury and eyes shielded with an upraised hand, lurched in and frantically struggled to close the hatch against the wind.

Immediately seeming to sense the presence of others, the figure spun around and sidestepped, seeming to move faster than the eye could register, and began screaming. The voice was high-pitched and sounded feminine. The figure's evasive move had ended up less than an arm's length from Paris, and he reflexively grabbed it from behind, dropping his phaser. He wanted to hold the figure still long enough to determine who or what it was. It appeared to be human. It was female.

Torres made a move toward the figure, but with a movement almost too quick to see, Kes placed herself between the half-Klingon and the girl. Torres stopped short.

Kes began speaking to the girl in words somehow both soft-sounding and yet loud enough to hear between the screams. "We won't hurt you. You just startled us, that's all. Who are you? We will not hurt you!"

The struggling stopped in mid-movement, and the screaming stopped in mid-sound. Paris almost toppled over. The sound of his panting echoed in the chamber. The girl stood very still, eyes wide and darting from Kes to Torres. She was small, perhaps just over five feet tall, but the thin arms and legs that extended out from her tan, tunic-like garment were well muscled. Long, dark hair fell over her shoulders and would have reached her waist were it not now entangled in her captor's arms. The end of her struggling had allowed the dust to settle, and Kes was close enough to see that her deep brown eyes were frightened.

"Federation Standard? But you're not human," she finally gasped out in a soft voice, young and slightly accented.

"No," Kes said soothingly, "I'm Ocampan. My name is Kes. B'Elanna," she indicated with her left hand, "is half human and half Klingon. The officer holding you is human, though." Without taking her eyes from the girl's face, she continued, slightly louder, "Tom, let her go so she can see you."

Reluctantly, slowly, Paris released the girl, disentangling himself from her hair and stepping away from her. She whirled around to look at him, still wearing an open-mouthed expression of disbelief as she took in his appearance. She absently reached up with her right hand to wipe stray locks of hair from her face.

"I'm Lieutenant Tom Paris of the Federation Starship *Voyager*," was all he could think to say.

Impatiently, Torres asked, "Is this your ship? How did you get here? Are there other survivors? How. . .?"

Recovered, Paris cut her off. "Excuse us. It's just that we're. . . very surprised. . . to find you here."

The girl seemed calmer now and her breathing was slower and more even although her posture hinted she was ready to bolt at the slightest sign of aggression from the other three. Kes flashed her a friendly smile.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"I'm Lena," she said warily. "I was just a child when we came here, so all I know is what the others told me. I don't remember much of what happened except being scared and the ship shaking and then waking up on the floor beside my bed with everything torn up around me." Her

eyes grew bright, and she looked at Kes with an unreadable expression. "Have you come to take us back?"

Kes averted her eyes from the young face before her. Torres looked at Paris, who stood still and silent, thinking of how to tell Lena that they, too, were trapped here.

Suddenly a cry burst from the rear of the compartment, making them all jump. Lena whirled around before Paris could formulate an answer to her question. She quickly strode toward the sound and disappeared into a crude doorway they had not noticed before.

The others followed her. Her destination was a room that had been fashioned out of large pieces of debris--com panel segments, conduit walls, and even part of a table top. About five meters on its two visible sides, it was fitted into the corner farthest from the outside hatch and used the compartment walls for its back and left boundaries.

The interior of the enclosure was lighted by brighter patches of the same glowing substance as the larger chamber. The door had been closed until Lena opened it and thus the little room had been virtually hidden in the pale illumination.

Lena was bending over the source of the sound which came from a mattress on the floor near the right-hand wall. It was a small child. She gently picked it up and held it close to her, making soft shushing noises. She turned to face the others.

"This is Rhetta. She's hungry."

Saying no more, she carried the child past them and out the door. She walked to the unoccupied back corner of the larger room and opened another previously invisible door, stepping through it into a mangled corridor with the others close behind. In the green light they could see crumpled walls and gaping depressions where wiring and pipes might once have been. Paris had to bend in several spots to pass under misshapen portions of the ceiling.

The corridor turned right and led into an area that had been made into a kind of common room. Flickering light from a rock firepit revealed make-shift chairs and a table made of roughly-rectangular metal scrap.

Lena placed Rhetta gently into a cradle that stood near the firepit. The child began whimpering again. Reaching into a vine basket, Lena produced a square of cloth and changed the little girl. After washing her hands, she moved to a low shelf on the back wall and retrieved a shallow cooking pot.

"Let me hold her while you're doing that," Kes offered and started toward the cradle.

"No!" Lena said sharply, turning her face toward the Ocompa. "Leave her there."

Kes backed off and clasped her hands behind her back. "Well, can I help you with that?" She nodded toward the fire.

"No. I don't need any help." She began preparing the food and paused before turning to the others. "Are you hungry?" she asked. "You can't leave while the storm's here, so we all might as well eat."

Torres spoke for the first time since Paris had cut off her questioning of the girl. "Yes, we are hungry. We were searching for food when we found your ship." She hoped this reference would spur Lena to start answering the hundreds of questions they had, but it didn't.

Instead, Lena shrugged her shoulders and turned back to her task. "I don't know why you couldn't find anything," she said. "There are plenty of things to eat in the woods. And if you wanted meat, you could have killed a Tree-Crawler. The little ones are usually out in the daytime."

Paris walked to one of the chairs and sat down heavily. Torres took the seat beside him, but Kes remained where she was, watching Lena. Paris bent forward, placed his elbows on his knees, and said, "We weren't sure which plants in the woods were safe to eat, and we didn't see any animals. How do you know which plants are OK?" Lena continued stirring.

"Beth taught me," she said simply.

"Who's Beth?" asked Torres, with obviously forced patience. "Is she your mother?"

"No. My mother died when we landed here." All three noted she hadn't said "crashed." "Beth was the one who took care of me. The others called her 'Ensign.' She got the spots and died before Ann had Rhetta." Paris sighed with the realization that any information they got from Lena would be highly subjective and of questionable use to them without constant clarification.

Lena offered nothing more. She brought a bowl of food to the table, pulling out the chair at the end. She retrieved the fussing child, sat down with her, and began spooning the food into her mouth. Rhetta quieted immediately, but she ate slowly and without the gusto that the others expected. Kes finally moved to a chair near the child and her caretaker. Torres shifted restlessly in her own seat, and Paris looked at his boots, thinking.

"Our whole ship didn't land here." Kes finally broke the silence. It was time that somebody started to exchange information. "It's still in orbit. We came down in a shuttlecraft to look for some things we need, and the storm caused us to crash." Lena was now looking at Kes. "That's how B'Elanna broke her arm. Now we can't get back to the ship, and the ship can't find us because of the interference."

"Beth told me stories of how we came here," Lena said. "She told me we had been in space near here since before I was born, looking for a way to get home. She said home was Earth and it was far away. Then we got to this place and the storm made us land and stay here. We didn't have another ship to look for us."

"Where are the others?" Torres asked. "Are they here inside? Or did they go somewhere else to live?" She was trying to keep her wording simple so Lena could follow her.

Rhetta would take no more food, so Lena pushed the bowl away and began rocking her. "Our food is ready now. Go ahead and eat, but leave some on the fire for me. I'm hungry, too."

Kes went to get the food for herself and her companions. Torres joined her, shifting from foot to foot as she propped her broken arm with her good hand. "Why won't she tell us anything?" She hissed the words, but still managed to keep them soft enough for only Kes to hear. "What's she trying to hide?"

"B'Elanna," Kes said seriously as she dished up a bowl of the thick mash, "she's still frightened. Imagine what it would be like if you thought you and your people were the only ones on a planet, stranded for years beyond any hope of ever getting home, and then three strange people show up who speak your language, claim to be from your home quadrant--one of them from your home *planet*--and start asking you questions. Wouldn't you be just a little cautious in that situation? Remember, Lena has only heard about the existence of intelligent beings other than the ones on her ship; she has never before actually seen any."

Torres sighed heavily. "I just wish she would get on with it, that's all." The room grew quiet as the three hungry people ate the welcome meal.

Lena rose slowly from her chair to place the now-sleeping Rhetta back in the cradle. She returned to the table with her own food. Like her guests, she ate in silence for a few minutes, but then she looked up almost too casually and addressed Paris.

"You can stay here until the storm lifts. Then you will have to leave. Rhetta has the spots, and I don't want you to get sick, too."

Kes seemed to struggle for control, but Paris made no such effort. His head snapped up suddenly and he demanded, "What do you mean she's sick?"

"Sometimes our people would get these little orange spots on their bodies and then they would get sick."

Kes held herself back no longer. "Lena, I have some medical training. Let me look at her. Maybe I can help her."

Before Lena had a chance to answer, Torres asked, "Is that what happened to the others? They got sick and died?"

"Some of them did. Lots of them were dead, like my mother, when we landed. Some were hurt and died later. Grown Tree-Crawlers killed some of them before we learned how to avoid them and catch the little ones."

Torres pressed on, undeterred. "But did everyone who got the spots die from the sickness?"

Lena made an exasperated sound as though she were dealing with slow children. "No! I told you *some* of them did. The others got better."

Unable to contain herself any longer, Torres shot up from her chair and almost yelled, "Then *where are they?*!"

Lena flinched at the outburst, but quickly got herself under control. She looked up calmly at the furious woman. However, Paris was studying her face as well as he could in the limited light, and he thought he saw unmistakable grief there.

"They're all gone," she answered slowly. "Ann was the last except for Rhetta and me. She made me promise I would take care of her baby, and I am. Then she just died. She wasn't sick at all, just sad. She said she was tired." Lena's voice started to quiver almost imperceptibly. "I took her to the big cave where the Tree-Crawlers sleep in the daytime so she could be with the others. Then the storm came down again, and I came back, and you were here."

Torres sat back down slowly as the meaning of Lena's words took form. Paris' face was a stunned blank, and Kes' hand flew to her mouth as if trying to hold the flood of grief inside. Paris finally spoke. "You two are the only ones left alive?" he whispered.

Lena rose and went to a chest in the corner from which she took worn blankets and large stuffed bags that seemed to be homemade pillows. She handed them to her guests.

"Sleep in here," she told them. "The storm won't lift until tomorrow." She carefully lifted the sleeping Rhetta from her cradle and started for the door. She stopped for a moment and turned back to Kes, who still sat silently at the table. "Rhetta's asleep now, but you can look at her in the morning. If you can make her better, then there will still be two of us left. Maybe forever."

The bridge officers sat almost slumping around the polished table in the Conference Lounge--all, that is, except Mr. Tuvok. His Vulcan stamina was presently the most envied characteristic on the ship, and he sat ram-rod straight, as usual, eager to begin.

"Tuvok, do you agree with Mr. Kim and Commander Chakotay's conclusions?" Captain

Janeway had to make a conscious effort not to rub her red-rimmed eyes as she spoke. She couldn't remember when she last looked at an object that didn't blur around the edges.

"Yes, Captain," answered the officer, no trace of tiredness in his voice. He leaned forward slightly and placed his elbows on the table, hands elevated and fingers steepled. "The 'thinning,' as you call it, seems to come at intervals in a repeating pattern. I have extrapolated the shuttle's most probable landing site from the last-known speed and trajectory. From this, we can infer that the next 'thinning' over that area will occur approximately fifteen hours, twenty-seven minutes from now. If we divert power from the deflector grid array to boost the gain on the sensors, then narrow the sensor radius to include only the 'thin' area, we should be able to get readings for approximately 4.4 minutes before the fluctuations begin again. With transporters standing by, we will be able to lock on to any communicator signal or human life sign we detect, and beam it or them aboard. In theory."

Janeway let out the breath she hadn't been aware she was holding. "In theory, Tuvok? Is that the best we can get?"

The Vulcan raised one eyebrow in a gesture the Captain had come to recognize as his version of impatience. "Unfortunately, yes. We have never before tried to 'read' a plasma storm, so theoretical results and our computer simulations are all we have to go on at this point." Janeway opened her mouth to speak again, but Tuvok continued, "However, I would like to point out that in coming to their conclusions, Ensign Kim and Commander Chakotay have considered an admirable number of options, variables, and--should we say, *creative*--approaches to the problem. I can think of no others. This is the best plan anyone in this situation could devise."

The Captain's eyes opened wider than they had since this ordeal began. Her two very human officers had just been given more praise than she had ever heard from any Vulcan. Kim still sat quietly, but a fleeting smile touched his face for an instant. Chakotay seemed to sit just a little more upright.

"Well," she said. "I'm certainly willing to try it since you deem it worthy."

"Aye, Captain," answered Tuvok evenly.

"Now," she said more loudly and firmly, planting her long-fingered hands palm down on the table and standing up, "let's all try to get some rest before we start this. Everyone will need to be at his peak of alertness for this to stand the best chance of working. Thank you, Tuvok. Commander, Ensign: fine work. Dismissed."

Chairs slid back and their occupants stood up slowly. Harry stretched before turning toward the door. Before he, too, turned to leave, the First Officer took a small step toward his Captain.

"One thing," he began slowly. "We thought we saw human life signs for a moment before they vanished and we assumed they couldn't be real. What if the same thing happens again?" This time Janeway made no effort to prevent her hand from going to her tired eyes. She rubbed them for a moment before returning Chakotay's gaze.

"Let's hope that this time we also see Klingon and Ocampan life signs at the same time. That increases our odds a bit." Chakotay tried to smile, failed, and turned to go, leaving the Captain to gather up her padd and follow.

For one of the very few times he could remember in his adult life, Tom Paris could not fall asleep. He was relatively comfortable, and the sounds of regular breathing from his two companions should have long ago lulled him away, but something he couldn't quite bring to the surface nagged at him. Something that Lena had said wasn't quite right, but so many emotions had been evoked by her conversation that he couldn't single out what specifically was bothering him.

Torres, it seemed, had had no such trouble. Military training and habit longstanding had allowed her to virtually will herself to sleep. Kes had been awake a little longer. The multitude of feelings she obviously struggled with had finally worn her out, though, and now she, too, slept.

Paris finally gave it up and rose as quietly as he could from his pallet. He was almost to the door when he heard a soft movement behind him and turned. Torres had risen to a sitting position and was looking at him.

"What's wrong, Starfleet? Can't sleep?"

"You might say I've got a lot on my mind," he answered.

"Like what will we do if we can't be rescued?" she asked.

"Something like that."

"Look," Torres said, her voice tired. "The storm has to let up sometime, doesn't it? And when it does, we will be able to communicate with the ship or the sensors will pick up our life signs, and all this will be over. I don't understand why you're so upset."

"The Captain can't stay in orbit forever just waiting to see our smiling faces again."

"Really? Well, I'll wager that if she even tried to leave here without us, the Maquis aboard would practically revolt and seize control of the ship. That's how loyal they are. They won't leave a comrade behind. Don't you trust Starfleet loyalty that far?"

"Damn it all, B'Elanna! This has nothing at all to do with loyalty!" Paris walked slowly over to Torres' pallet. He squatted so his eyes were level with hers. "The *Zane*'s crew never made it out of here. Apparently, no other ships ever came to this planet, not even the Kazon. Maybe they know something we don't. Maybe we're going to be stuck here for the rest of our lives, just like the other ship."

Torres kept her voice low enough that it would not wake Kes, but apparently a growing irritation was making that difficult. "The *Zane* didn't have another ship in orbit who knew they were down here! How can you just assume that *Voyager* is helpless up there? I don't believe you're acting like this! What's gotten into you? With your past, I know this isn't the first time you've been stuck somewhere with no apparent way out." She almost sneered. "Going soft, Starfleet?"

Paris didn't cringe at the insult, but his face flushed with anger. He locked his eyes on hers with an almost palpable hold. For a moment, it seemed something inside Torres desperately wanted to break away from him, but she did not move.

"Sure, I've been 'lost' before," he said, his voice barely under control. "And I always knew that somehow, sometime, someone would eventually find me or I would find my own way out. Most of the time, my biggest worry was what I would face once I was out--a dressing-down from a superior officer, a reprimand for losing equipment or personnel, a re-assignment, something like that. But I always knew that whether I went back a 'hero' or a disappointment, I would always *be back*. Even if we do manage to get out of this one, what are we going back *to*--a ship that's just as stranded, as we are. There's nobody out there to find us and magically whisk

us back to Earth, just like there was nobody around to find *them*.”

Torres sat very still even after Paris turned his eyes away and rose to his feet. Paris knew Torres had been aware ever since their own Maquis crew had merged with *Voyager*'s for survival that their chances of ever seeing the Alpha quadrant again were questionable. But to preserve sanity and purpose, she had apparently buried that fear deeply, just as had the rest of the two crews. They had no choice. Seeing Paris react like this seemed to shock her; apparently she thought he had more control than that, more acceptance of their harsh reality, even if it did come out in a brash, rakish attitude most of the time. She sat silently and watched him return to the chamber's door. Lena had left it open, and he stepped through it quietly.

Paris tried to still the turmoil that raged inside him as he walked down the corridor in an unexplored direction. He found only one other door, but it did not open when he pushed on it, so he turned back the way he had come. He passed the open door and continued walking.

When he reached the main area of the structure, he paused and looked around. The green glow still dimly lit the area, as it had in the common room, making it impossible to ascertain the time. All of them had passively and without question accepted Lena's conviction that it was night and time to sleep, and now he wondered why they had done that. Perhaps they had simply unconsciously accepted that she would know such a thing since this was "her" world. *Yes*, he thought, *her world. Her world and only a very small child with whom to share it.* A sense of loneliness more profound than he had ever imagined possible almost overwhelmed him there in the near darkness.

He stood for several moments before he became aware of a very soft, human-made sound. It was a moan, almost inaudible. He moved toward Lena and Rhetta's room. The sound definitely emanated from there; becoming clearer as he went closer.

The door was ajar. Hoping fervently that he would not startle her into screaming again, he softly called, "Lena? Is there something wrong?"

He was greatly relieved when the huddled figure on the floor beside the child's bed did not jump up but only rolled over and drew up to a sitting position. Pained eyes looked at him. Hesitatingly, he stepped inside the door and again halted. "Are you OK?" he asked again.

Lena had stopped moaning and now rose slowly to her feet. He noticed at once that she stood with her weight resting mainly on her left leg. "My leg hurts. It does sometimes when the storm's bad." Again, something fluttered just at the edge of his awareness.

"Is it all right if I sit down for a few minutes with you?" he asked carefully. "I couldn't sleep either, and I wouldn't mind company." He regretted the words as soon as he said them. Here he was, with someone who was more alone than he had ever been in his comparatively privileged life, and he was lamely insinuating that he wanted someone else awake with him. He didn't know how to correct the gaff without making it worse, so he didn't try.

"Yes," she said as she lowered herself again to her mat. Paris sat down where he was. He searched for something else to say, something less trite this time. Lena surprised him by starting to speak again, unbidden.

"When I was little, Beth said I was about three years old by the way she and the others counted time, I fell off a part of the ship where I had climbed up to see a hunting party coming back with a Tree-Crawler. I was sick for days and days with a fever, and my leg hurt more than anything has hurt me since. Beth said it was broken and Toklin had to set it. I don't remember that. I guess I was too sick. After a long time I could walk again, but I didn't climb on the ship

anymore.” She paused and looked over at the sleeping child behind her. “I’m never going to let Rhetta climb on anything, not ever,” she said with conviction. Then she turned back to her visitor. “Will she get better if Kes helps her?” she pleaded. “They’re more likely to die with the spots if they get them when they’re little like she is.” Her eyes brimmed with dampness, but she did not let her tears fall.

“I don’t know,” Paris answered. “I really don’t know. But you can be sure that Kes will do the very best she can for Rhetta. I promise you that.”

They sat in silence for a while as Paris allowed Lena time for her quiet grief and himself time to frame what he would say next. “Lena.” He paused briefly to make sure he had her attention. “What little medical equipment we had with us on the shuttle was pretty much destroyed when we crashed here, but there is a doctor on our ship who is very good at treating things like this. If we could get the two of you back there with us, I’m sure he could help. He has all the best resources and skills that Starfleet has to offer. Can you tell us anything, anything at all, that might help us get back there? Did your people learn anything about the plasma storms here that we might use?”

She was still looking straight into his eyes, lines of puzzlement appearing on her face. “I don’t understand what you mean about the ‘storms.’ There’s only one storm, and it’s always here.”

There! That was it! That was what had been bothering him; all the times Lena had spoken of the storm, she had spoken of it as *the* storm, not *a* storm, not storms--always as a single entity, the *same* entity, no matter when it happened.

He leaned forward and almost reached out to take her by the shoulders before he stopped himself. He mustn’t frighten her now; he must keep her talking if any of them were to have any hope at all of ever getting back to *Voyager*. He tried to calm his breathing.

“Please tell me about it. Tell me everything you know. It’s very important that I know everything you know about this storm and how it behaves if Rhetta is to have the best chance of getting well. Start with what you said earlier about the storm lifting tomorrow. How do you know that?”

“The others taught me how to tell what the storm would do. I make marks in the sand to keep track.” She paused here and looked over her shoulder at Rhetta. The child stirred, turned, but did not wake. “I can show you if you want to see.”

Paris almost leaped to his feet. “Yes! I very much want to see!”

Lena began to get up, but as soon as she put her weight on her aching leg it buckled. Paris’ arms shot out and caught her before she fell. He could feel his adrenaline building. “Careful!” he admonished. “Where is this sand?”

“Back in the little room behind the kitchen. Toklin and Drevis always kept it where no one else would bother it.”

Paris bent down and scooped her up. “Just show me the way,” he said as he started toward the door carrying her.

Their progress down the mangled hallway was much slower this time since he had to be careful not to scrape Lena’s legs or head along the mangled walls. The task itself of carrying her was not difficult at all, though. She felt as well-muscled now, relaxed in his arms, as she had when struggling in them earlier, but she was as light as her size had led him to expect. He felt another pang as he realized anew just how hard life must have already been on this young creature

to produce such underlying strength.

When they reached the door past the kitchen, the one he had been unable to open earlier, Lena asked him to turn so that she could reach the door frame. She lifted an almost invisible bracing bar from its latch, and Paris pushed the door. This time it opened as easily as all the others he had encountered. He stepped through and stopped in his tracks when he saw where he was.

This Toklin and Drevis that Lena spoke of must have been scientists. The room was set up as a laboratory. On long, high tables sat cobbled-together equipment of startling variety.

Lena pointed to a waist-high table along one wall. As he approached it, Paris could see that its top was a shallow wooden box with no top. Inside was a layer of sand bearing marks of varying lengths in groups of (mostly) five and seven. He carefully lowered Lena to her feet close enough to the table so she could hold onto it for support. She pointed to the last series of marks, a set of six, being careful not to touch them.

"See?" she said. "This shows that today was the last day in the long cycle. The storm will lift tomorrow afternoon for a while. Then it will come down again, but not so low that it will bother us for three more days." She had been running her pointed finger about an inch above the lowest row of marks as though she were an archaeologist reading ancient runes on a new find. Paris marveled that she knew so confidently how to read what seemed randomness to him, and he wondered if she could read words as well, or would they be to her as much of a mystery as these marks were to him?

"Did your ship's communication array survive the crash?" Paris instantly regretted his automatic choice of words when her face clouded with confusion. "I mean," he tried again, "did anyone ever use any. . ." he could not think of a simple enough word so he went with what he had, " 'equipment' to try to talk to any passing ships? Did they try to call out from here?"

She thought. "Yes. I mean, I remember Lilly talking into something that couldn't talk back and asking it to answer her. I was young and thought she was being silly, but her face didn't look like she was being silly. I guess she was trying to find another ship." She swayed just a bit, obviously tired of leaning her weight on her good leg. He pulled a chair to her and waited until she sat down.

"Can you remember anything else?"

"No," she said softly. "But I don't think anyone ever answered her."

Paris hung his head, unable to get any more useful facts from the girl. He was almost ready to take her back to her room and maybe try again to sleep himself when she spoke suddenly and urgently with the closest thing to excitement in her voice he had yet heard.

"Wait! Now I remember! Lilly wrote things down in a book and told everyone that if anything ever happened to her and anyone came to this world after she had gone to the Tree-Crawlers, we should give them the book!" She looked at Paris who was still trying to digest what she had said. "Can you read?" she asked him.

Awareness--and hope--dawned. "Yes!" he almost shouted, momentarily forgetting his sleeping companions down the hall. "Do you know where this book is?"

She pointed past Paris to the wall just above one of the lab tables. "Behind that door," she said. Paris could see no door in the dim light, so he walked closer to where she indicated. He ran his hand over the bulkhead. Yes, there it was in the shadow. "Lilly said the magic words were 'one, two, three.'"

Paris moved the viewer blocking the light and saw an antique combination lock in a hasp that was bolted to the door. He bent close and squinted his eyes until he could more or less see the tiny numbers. Saying a quick prayer to the saint of lost causes, he dialed the combination "right 1, left 2, right 3" and pulled. To his relief the lock released, and he quickly removed it, opened the door, and reached in.

He felt smoothness. His fingers searched for and found the edges, closing around the object and pulling it out. He looked at it with an almost reverent awe. It was a hardbound book, an antique by the looks of it. He carefully opened the cover and saw real paper, yellowed with age but not yet brittle enough to crack and tear if handled carefully. Reaching back into the hiding place, he withdrew several other objects that appeared to be data modules. He had forgotten Lena until she spoke.

"I have some moss in my room that's bright enough to see just about anything," she offered. "Let's go back there. I need to check on Rhetta."

Reigning in his impatience, Paris handed her the book and the modules. "Here. You carry these and I'll carry you."

When they reached the room, Rhetta was still sleeping, but her breath rattled. Lena touched the small forehead with her hand and turned a worried face to Paris. "She's hot. She's getting sicker."

"Then it's very important that I read this as quickly as I can and find out if there's a way we can get her back to the ship so the doctor can help her," Paris explained.

Lena reluctantly turned away from Rhetta picked up a small box from beside the pallet, removed a handful of greenish-blue fuzz, and squeezed it between her palms. It started to glow and grew rapidly brighter.

She handed it to Paris. "I don't want the light to wake Rhetta. She needs her sleep. Go over there." She pointed to the corner farthest from them, "and put it on the wall. It will stick and you can read there."

Paris did as she said. He looked once more at Lena, stretched out facing Rhetta's pallet, stroking the child's short blonde hair comfortingly. Paris opened the book and saw neat, feminine-looking script.

My name is Lillian Jessica Morris, Captain of the United Federation of Planets ship *USS Richard Zane NCC-51847*. My crew of 435 and I were pulled into the Delta Quadrant on Stardate 28153.8 when an unstable wormhole opened almost on top of us while on routine patrol near the Cardassian border. For details of this, please refer to the ship's logs contained in the data storage modules which should have been found with this book. Set down here is the story of what has happened to us since we crash-landed on this planet. In addition to myself, 73 of the crew survived the crash which we believe to have been caused by a planet-wide plasma storm that our instruments failed to read. We were attempting a close-orbit survey of the planet to determine its suitability for settlement when instrument interference caused our orbit to decay. Before we could find a way to correct this, we were caught by a tendril of the storm and pulled into the atmosphere. . . .

Paris lost all connection with his surroundings as he read the account before him. In his

mind's eye, the small room where he sat with the last of the *Zane*'s survivors melted away and was replaced by a collection of injured and stunned humanity trying to survive on a strange planet with almost everything they had, destroyed. Only once during the night did he come back to reality when a cramp gripped his left leg and forced him to shift position. He saw then that Lena had fallen asleep with her arm protectively over Rhetta.

Slowly he rubbed his aching leg until the cramp subsided. As he watched the sleeping pair, he thought back over what he had read and wondered what it must have felt like for that long-dead crew to know they were here with no means of escape. Like his own band of travelers, they had been brought here to the Delta quadrant against their will and had been faced with no choice but to start back toward home, a home they surely realized they would never see again. And then the final blow had come--they had crashed here. God, what must they have felt then? All hopes dashed, they had spent years here, dying one by one, alone and cut off forever from the rest of humanity.

He looked again at the sleeping pair. How could Lena so calmly accept that she would live out her life with no one but Rhetta for company? Had she thought of what would happen to Rhetta when she herself died? Had she realized what it would be like for Rhetta never to see another sentient being for the remainder of her life? The pain momentarily overwhelmed him, and he squeezed his eyes closed tightly. What his mind saw there in the darkness, though, was not Lena and Rhetta, but himself, Tom Paris, still onboard *Voyager* as an old man. An old man, surrounded by old men (and women) and memories of the others already dead. An old man who had lived out his life without ever seeing his home again. An old man whose life had bled out of him long before the end. An old man alone.

He felt paralyzed by the pain. As he fought to breathe, he forced his mind from those ghastly thoughts by sheer force of will. He would not give in to the fear. He would mold hope where none was by saving these last two lives now sleeping near him in the wreck of the only world they had known. He vowed they would know another soon, a world with real light and a working ship and other human beings and a future and hope. If he could not get himself home to Earth, he would stop at nothing to give them a chance for a home, even if that home was just a starship that may never again see its own region of space, much less its own planet. At least they would have others of their kind. At least they would not die alone.

When he thought he could at last open his eyes without going mad, he did so. He gave himself time to get his breathing under control and looked at Lena and Rhetta. They had not heard his thoughts screaming. They still slept.

He resumed reading.

Later (how much later he had no idea) Paris closed the book and sat for a moment staring straight ahead. His heart was pounding and he felt as if he might pass out. Closing his eyes, he forced himself to take several slow, deep breaths before he moved. He got stiffly to his protesting feet and stood on shaky legs. He gave a last glance at Lena and started back towards the door. He stopped suddenly as he realized what he had seen. She had turned onto her back, still sleeping soundly, and her tunic had ridden far up her right thigh. Plainly visible now on her smooth skin was an irregular spot of bright orange.

He almost didn't catch himself before crying out aloud in rage. But he knew that wouldn't help her. He turned once again to the door and stepped quickly and silently through it.

Once in the hallway to the common room, he fairly ran. Twice he hit already-bruised places on his body, but he was oblivious to the pain. He burst through the doorway and called to the two women still asleep on the floor, "Kes! Torres! Wake up!"

Torres bolted upright, instantly alert. Kes started and sat up somewhat slower, rubbing her eyes. Torres was on her feet now, automatically reaching to her hip for the phaser that wasn't there. "What is it?" she demanded. "What's wrong?"

Paris grabbed her shoulders, one hand still clutching the book. He looked from her to Kes, who was now standing. "I think there's hope for *Voyager* to get to us! It's all in here!" He drew back the hand holding the book and held it up for them to see. "The *Zane*'s captain survived the crash and chronicled everything the crew learned about this planet, including the plasma storm! It's actually an integral part of the planet's atmosphere that rises and falls like one big cloud cover. If the sand table is right, it will soon be thinning out enough that the ship may be able to find us!"

"Sand table?" Torres demanded as she twisted away from him and broke his grasp. "What the hell are you talking about?!" She looked at him, obviously uncomprehending.

Kes stepped closer, looking almost as confused as Torres. "Tom, start from the beginning and tell us how you know all this."

Struggling to regain his control, Paris pulled out a chair from the table and sat facing the other two. They took their cue from him and also sat. He told them about not being able to sleep, finding Lena awake, and discovering Captain Morris's journal. He tried to skip the irrelevant parts about their struggle for survival--he fervently hoped they would have no need to use those lessons--and stuck to what they had learned about the storm's patterns. The three of them were so caught up in the relating and the hearing of the tale that none of them noticed Lena when she entered and stopped quite still in the shadows, listening.

Paris finished breathlessly, "So the marks Lena made mean that the storm should thin enough today in the area where we crashed that if *Voyager* is scanning, she should be able to pick up some sign of us and get us out of here!" His smile faded, replaced by a look of worry. "That means we have to get back there with Lena and Rhetta right away!" A pause. "How do we know when it's safe to leave? Is it morning yet?"

Lena's movement out of the shadows startled them all. She walked over to stand by Paris. Her leg seemed to be better. Without preamble, she said, "It's morning now, and you will have until the sun is straight up to get back where you need to be. By the time you are ready to go, the storm will be lifted enough that you can travel."

Paris looked at her with a new respect for what she had endured in her short life. "What's this 'you' stuff? You have to go with us, Lena. This is your chance to get back to your people, to..." he had almost said "go home" but stopped himself in time. Who knew if any of them would ever see the Alpha Quadrant again?

"Yes," Kes added quickly, clearly realizing what Paris had almost said. "This is your chance to get help for Rhetta."

Paris shot a pained look at Kes as he remembered the spot on Lena's thigh. He opened his mouth to tell Kes about it, but she didn't give him the chance. "And you have to go with her to take care of her while she gets better. You promised Ann, remember?" Lena looked at each

of them in turn before she slowly nodded. Kes stood up and reached out a hand to softly stroke the girl's hair in a gesture that reminded Paris of the way he had seen Lena herself stroking Rhetta's hair. "Get Rhetta ready so we can leave. We don't know exactly how much time we have."

Lena looked down at Paris who returned her gaze fleetingly before lowering his eyes to his hands. "Do as Kes says. We need to hurry. We'll meet you."

Lena turned and left. Paris did not look back up. Kes gathered up their few belongings in a sling-type sack. As Paris rose and secured the sack across his shoulder, he said flatly and without meeting the others' eyes, "Lena is sick, too. I saw the spot on her leg while she was sleeping." He stepped through the doorway, not giving the others time to respond.

Lena was standing at the hatch waiting for them with Rhetta in her arms. The child was wrapped in a piece of fabric that might have once been pink. Beside her on the floor was her small bundle.

"I'll carry this if you want to carry Rhetta," Kes said. Lena nodded. "We didn't eat, but will she be all right without breakfast?" Kes could hear the sound of congested breathing coming from the blanket.

Lena looked down at the tiny life in her arms. "She won't eat," she answered. "She's not really awake yet anyway. They always sleep a lot when they're sick." Paris now had the hatch open, and they stepped outside. Even without bright sunlight, their eyes fought against the glare of the outside world. The three shipmates looked up at the sky and saw the now familiar churning gray masses above them.

They started off, retracing the path that brought them here. Lena never fell behind, even on the steepest parts. They walked in silence until they entered the woods. Just before they got to the stream, Lena stopped by one of the larger trees. "If you throw a rock up and knock down some of that purple fruit, you can have something to eat." Paris did as she instructed, and he handed each of the others a piece. Their meager breakfast tasted like a salty, slightly grainy apple.

Lena walked beside Paris where the underbrush allowed. She peeled off a section of the purple skin with her teeth and ate it. Then she bit off a small chunk of the inner flesh, but instead of eating it she mashed it against her front teeth with her tongue. With one finger she put the mashed fruit to Rhetta's lips. Lena made soft, cooing sounds to encourage her, but the child would not take the nourishment. Lena sighed heavily. Paris turned his eyes back ahead when he saw her face.

They made good time on their hike and reached the wrecked shuttle when the sun was halfway to its apex. Inside, they dropped down and drank from their water containers. Lena failed to get Rhetta to take any water, so she wet her hand and ran it over the child's face and hair. Rhetta moved slightly but made no complaint.

Once he had rested, Paris stood up and stretched. "I think one of us should stay outside in case the hull adds enough blocking to make a difference," he said, stepping through the opening. Kes removed her communicator and handed it to him. He pressed it to his uniform and tapped it. "Paris to *Voyager*. Do you read?" He repeated his hail, but only silence answered him.

Kes moved over to sit beside Lena as she rocked Rhetta. "May I see her now?" she asked gently.

Lena hesitated a moment, stopped rocking, and lovingly handed her charge into Kes' waiting arms. Even through the layers of wrapping, Kes could feel the heat of the child's fever.

Trying hard to keep her face impassive, she slowly unwrapped the material until the infant was exposed, only her crude long tunic remaining. When she lifted up the bottom of the garment, she saw the spots that had grown until they almost ran together and covered all of her skin. Kes lowered the tunic.

This was the first close look any of them had had of the child except for the blonde hair Paris had seen while she slept. Rhetta was beautiful. Chubby cheeks showed the beginning evidence of high cheekbones, and long, curly lashes framed her closed eyelids. Kes began to sponge the exposed skin. Perhaps that would reduce the fever a bit. Other than that, there was little else she could do until they got to sickbay. The child's breathing seemed even more ragged than before.

Torres stepped past the others and went outside to stand beside Paris as he looked around. When she stopped beside him, he said, "How's the arm? Must hurt like hell."

"Yeah, well. It's the least of our worries."

"At least now we know what caused the human life signs to show up on those scans before we left the ship. Do you think Harry has figured out about the storm's thin spots yet? For that matter, has he recognized yet that the fluctuations are caused by a plasma storm? The instruments can't read it, so how would they know? We could have just given ourselves and those two," he nodded toward where Lena sat, "false hope."

Torres absently rubbed at her upper arm above the splint. "If Harry doesn't recognize it as a plasma storm, Chakotay should. Remember he and the Captain encountered one when they were left on that planet. He no doubt told Harry, Harry and Tuvok together have figured out about the rise and fall of the storm, and now they're just waiting to spirit us away." She smiled slightly, but Paris knew that despite her bravado of the previous night, she was as worried in her own way as he. He continued to look at Lena.

"Captain, the thinning has begun in the area of the shuttle's probable location."

"Stay on it, Tuvok." In the thick, electric tension on the bridge, Janeway had to force herself to remain in her Captain's chair rather than go to the console where the Vulcan stood. He didn't need her looking over his shoulder; he knew his job. Out of habit, she glanced at her First Officer's chair, but it was vacant. Chakotay was lending a second pair of hands to Kim as he constantly recalibrated sensors and tracked readings.

The Vulcan spoke again. "Minimum interference in eight minutes. We will attempt communication at that time."

Chakotay said without looking up from the panel in front of him, "Transporter is ready and will be activated as soon as we have com or life sign location."

"Good," Janeway responded. "Commander, I want you in that transporter room during the actual transport. Tuvok and Ensign Kim can handle things on the bridge. Be sure to keep Neelix out of the way down there. The Doctor is standing by."

"Aye, Captain."

Eight minutes. Janeway knew it would be an eternity.

"What else is in that book?" Torres asked, nodding toward the volume Paris still held.

"Practically their whole story. How they survived after they crashed here, how they learned to avoid the Tree-Crawlers after losing six of their crew to them, what children were born..." he paused and took a deep breath, "and how they died."

Torres waited quietly for him to continue. After a time, he did.

"Captain Morris doesn't mention Rhetta, so she must have died before Ann gave birth. She talked quite a bit about this illness. She continued to think the three remaining medical staff would find a cure. But then, she also continued to think they would be found and rescued. I guess she couldn't afford to give up hope." He seemed about to say more, but static erupted from the com badge on his chest, and he jumped.

"... can. . . read?"

Paris frantically tapped the badge to activate its return function. "*Voyager!*" he practically yelled. "We read you! Can you get us out of here? We have injuries!"

More static. "... Paris, we. . . beam up. . . three minutes. . . lock. . ."

"Kes! Lena! Get out here! They're getting through!" Paris ran the few steps back to the shuttle's entry and helped Lena out. "With B'Elanna!" he ordered, pointing. He turned back to Kes and reached out for her. Instead of handing him her small bundle so she could get up, Kes slowly raised her face to look at him. Paris froze. Kes was completely pale, and tears silently coursed down her face. Paris knelt to get closer.

"Kes?" he whispered. She looked back down to the child she held. The child who made no sound. The child who did not move. "Oh, no!" his voice quivered as he realized the meaning of Kes' inaction. He reached out to her again, this time taking her gently in his arms and saying softly in her ear, "There was nothing you could have done, Kes. There was no way."

He lifted the silent Ocampan to her feet. With his arm still protectively around her, they started over to join the other two. Lena had been watching them, and now her face became rigid. As soon as she saw Kes' face clearly, she darted to her and grabbed at Rhetta's still form. Paris let go of Kes and grabbed Lena by the shoulders. She turned her wild face to him.

"Let me go!" She screamed. "Let me go! Let me go!"

"Listen to me, Lena!" Paris shouted back at her, trying to hold her eyes with his. "We couldn't help her without our medical equipment! We didn't know how!" The thin form struggled frantically in his arms. He didn't let go of her, even when his com badge activated again.

"... having trouble locking onto. . . reading four. . . try. . . close. . ."

"Tom, get over here NOW!" Torres shouted. Paris half-walked, half-dragged the writhing body to join the others. Kes still held the child tightly. Trying to call up what little reserve of strength he still had, Paris gripped Lena tighter, knowing he must be hurting her. She showed no sign of noticing the pain and continued to struggle. He tried to calm his voice yet still make himself heard above her wailing. "Lena! We have to get back to *Voyager* now! Please!"

Lena's wild dark eyes remained locked with his. In them he could see reflected all the pain, all the loss of the universe. His own losses, his own situation vanished in that bottomless well of grief. He struggled to speak. "We can help you. On the ship we can make you better. You can survive! *You have to survive!*" He was shaking her, trying to force her to hear him.

Her struggling quieted just a little. She was gasping for breath. "No!" Her voice was hoarse from screaming. "I don't want to go without her!"

From the com badge, “. . .commence transport. . .seconds.”

Lena pulled back violently from Paris and almost broke his grip. She was straining to get away from him, away from them all, away from her only hope to leave this planet where she would forever be utterly alone. The agonized grief on her face was now joined by a look of pure terror and incalculable rage. “There’s nothing without her!” She was screaming again. “I promised! I promised Ann! I promised!”

Knowing there was no more time, Torres grabbed at the girl. Lena responded immediately by unexpectedly lashing out with her arm under where Paris held her. There was no time for Torres to react. Lena’s elbow caught her in still-sore ribs, and as she bent slightly, Lena’s arm landed a blow on the splinted portion of the injured arm.

Stunned by the sudden sharp pain, Torres yelped and sagged to her knees. The distraction was enough. As Paris’ grip loosened just a fraction in his surprise, Lena broke free of him.

Again from the com badge, “. . .now.”

Tom Paris’ last memory of the planet would forever be that of Lena bolting wildly away from him through the trees.

He was still screaming for her when he materialized on *Voyager*’s transporter pad, arms reaching but closing on emptiness, carrying him over the edge. A surprised Chakotay caught him as he fell.

“Computer, emergency override. Authorization Janeway, pi, one, one, zero.” The door slid open and the Captain walked into the dim anteroom of Paris’ quarters. The only light came from the computer screen. Had she not known he was there, she would not have noticed him sitting slumped in the desk chair he had rolled over to the viewport. She cleared her throat. No response.

“A few days’ rest doesn’t mean you can’t leave your quarters, Mr. Paris,” she ventured. Still no response. She walked over to where he sat. He was not asleep. He was staring out into the vastness beyond the port. She pulled up another chair close enough to his that he could feel her presence but far enough not to intrude too much. She came straight to the point.

“The Doctor’s autopsy showed Rhetta died from a form of parasite. That was what caused the orange blotches on her body. Since the parasite didn’t survive long after her death, there were few tests he could do. He says he still doesn’t know for certain that he could have cured the child, but I think he’s just being modest. However, since none of you were infected, we’ll never know.”

After a brief silence, she changed the subject and continued, “Chakotay and Mr. Kim finally decoded all the log entry data modules from the *Zane*, and you can access them anytime you’re ready.” She took a long deep breath. “Tuvok stayed on duty for thirty-six hours, trying to find another trace of human life sign in the sensor fluctuations before we had to leave orbit.” She could not add in words that Tuvok had failed, but she knew Paris understood when she saw his jaws clench.

“And I have finished reading Captain Morris’s journal. She was truly a remarkable woman to do what she did with the survivors on that planet.” Carefully she now ventured into dangerous territory. “As the only child to survive the crash and the hardships that followed, Lena must have been the embodiment of all the Captain’s hope and faith, don’t you think? I’m sure everyone

around that girl gave her all the knowledge and tools they could for her to stand the best chance of surviving. She may be only twenty years old, but she is wise far beyond what we can ever measure.”

She stopped when she heard a sound from the other chair. She leaned closer. The sound repeated. It was a single word. “Why?”

Janeway looked at what she could see of his face. In her best mother/counselor/Captain voice she said, “I’m not sure I know all her reasons. She must have been feeling emotions that maybe she herself couldn’t even name. But what I do know is that she had just lost what meant the most in the universe to her--her hope, her reason to keep trying. With that kind of pain, anything we might have given her here meant nothing at that moment.” She leaned closer, now purposely invading that personal space he carefully maintained. With one long-fingered hand, she stroked his hair once, then rested the hand on his arm.

“It’s inbred in us humans to seek the familiar, the comforting, the healing, when we are in deep pain. I think maybe that was what she was doing, seeking a place to ‘go to ground’ until the pain stopped.” She paused so that he would hear her next words. “She wanted to go *home*. And whether we understand it or not, that planet, that wrecked starship, is the only home she has ever known.”

“But how long can she survive? Even if she recovers from the parasites, how long can she go on alone?”

“I don’t have those answers for you, Tom. All I can tell you is that humanity, collectively and singly, has an enormous capacity for self-preservation. You need to understand--and believe --that she has just as good a chance to survive as not. We found her, even if by accident, and someone else may, too. Our failure to rescue her doesn’t necessarily ‘doom’ her.” The muscles in the arm beneath her hand went rigid, and the tension climbed to Paris’ clenched jaws.

“It’s not *our* failure, can’t you see that?” he spat between his teeth. “It’s mine! All mine! I couldn’t save her, and I can’t save *us*! I couldn’t get her back to *Voyager*, and I don’t know how to get us back home!”

Now she understood. She willed herself to complete stillness as he vented long-suppressed anger, fear, and pain. It wasn’t just his inability to rescue the young girl that tortured him. His facade was crumbling.

“I was always the one who could ‘take’ what happened to us, never bothered by being stranded out here. I always felt strong. Now I just feel raw, like my skin’s been peeled away. I feel defeated. I’m afraid we’ll never get back home and I’ll die just as alone as Lena probably will.”

Janeway turned her eyes to the viewport and sat silently for a few moments. Many of her crew had already passed through this particular emotional crossroad, but she had been too occupied with her enormous responsibility to wonder when or even if her cocky helmsman would finally deal with his own pain and fear. Obviously, she had allowed herself to believe he didn’t need to, had allowed herself to believe that his cool exterior hid no such normal emotions. Her face now showed her own pain at realizing Paris was just as scared as the rest of them were. She seemed to collect her thoughts, took a deep breath, and began to speak.

“I don’t know how to get us home, either, Tom,” she said gently, “and I’m the Captain. But what I do know is where home *is*.”

He turned to face her questioningly. She pointed with her free hand to an area of space

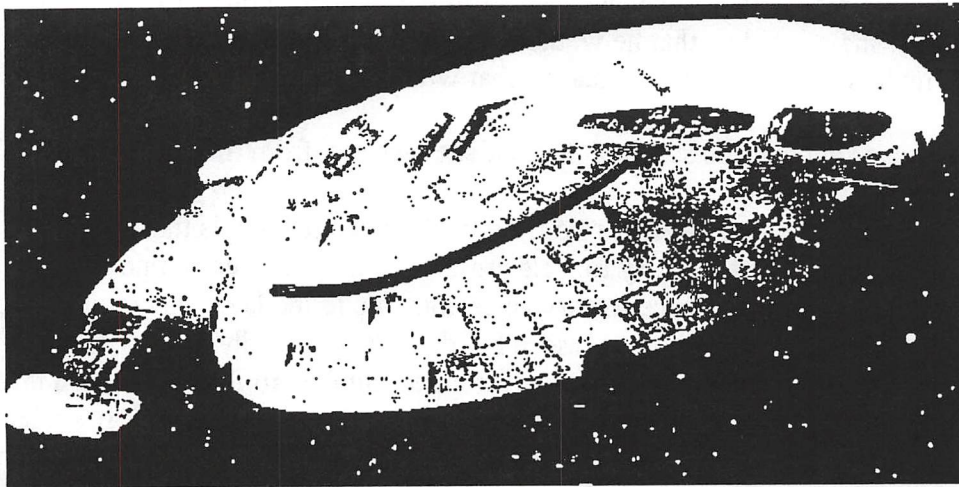
that seemed empty of stars but somehow just a little less dark than the surrounding blackness.

"It's straight ahead, right there. Not off to port, not over to starboard--straight ahead. Look at it."

Paris looked, knowing he would see little except her faith. She continued.

"Keep looking at that spot. Don't look away because if you do, it will be hard to find it again. Don't be afraid. Keep focused on that spot."

He stared unblinkingly, ever so slowly grasping the meaning of her words. Gradually the rigidity began to ebb. The young lieutenant said nothing, but his free arm moved so that his hand closed over hers. He squeezed tightly, as if holding onto life itself, and did not let go. He continued to stare out the port. His Captain lowered her head so she would not see the tears that began finally to fall.



LOST IN SPACE

Transition: 2024

By Steven H. Wilson

Author's Introduction: Guy Williams died in 1992, 27 years after Lost in Space was first aired. If John Robinson had died at the same point in the Jupiter II's mission, it would be the year 2024. Robinson West, Don and Judy's son in this story, is a totally manufactured character. Quano (the Leader) was played by Kurt Russell in the episode "The Challenge." His father was Michael Ansara. They came from an advanced, male-chauvinist culture, and challenged Will and John Robinson each to a duel. The opponents emerged from the competition with a new respect for each other and each others' customs.

The headstone was a simple one, not at all like the elaborate memorials Maureen remembered from cemeteries on earth. Her son-in-law Don had carved it out of a vein of rock with a laser, and the Robot had carried it here, polished it, and carved the inscription on it. A simple inscription suited the occupant of the grave best, it seemed:

*John Robinson
Born October 4, 1958
Died April 8, 2024
Husband, Father, Pioneer*

He'd been dead for six months, and Maureen had come here every day to visit him--sometimes for hours on end.

Perhaps it was silly to speak to a piece of dead, cold stone. Perhaps she had just become sentimental and impractical in her old age. Nevertheless, she'd spent more than four decades telling John what was on her mind, sharing her problems, her insights, her fears. She didn't feel

like giving that up.

Somewhere, unscientific as her well-educated mind told her it was to believe it, she knew John could hear her.

"They're almost ready to go," she said to the quiet monument. "Don says the technology installed in the *Jupiter* is just remarkable. He wishes we'd had it twenty years ago." She smiled. "I'll bet you do, too."

She rubbed her knees and fiddled idly with a stone on the ground, pushing it about with the toe of her boot.

"John," she said finally, every bit as apprehensive as she would have been had he been sitting here, looking at her. "I'm thinking... I'm considering not going. I know that may sound foolish, but I've given it a lot of thought. You see--"

"Grandmother?" a voice called from the bottom of the hill. "Are you up there?"

There was no point ignoring the call, she knew. The boy was persistent, like the rest of his family. He would come looking if she didn't answer. "Up here, Rob," she called.

He appeared over the top of the hill, Robinson West, her seventeen-year-old grandson. As he grew to adulthood, his hair had lost most of the paleness he'd inherited from Judy, but it was still a dirty blonde, and he had her blue eyes. From Don he'd inherited a fierce temper, from both parents, great intelligence. Now, his usual quick smile was replaced by worry as he approached her.

"Grandmother, it's time to go! Dad says we only have a twenty minute launch window --"

She smiled at him. "I know, Rob. I just got carried away talking--" She interrupted herself. She knew her family knew she came here and talked to John, but she didn't discuss it with them.

"To Granddaddy?" he finished.

She nodded.

He walked over, placed a hand on her shoulder, and looked solemnly at the grave. "I miss talking to him, too."

She patted his hand. "I suppose we all do, but I'd planned on him always being there. Men like your grandfather are the kind everyone around them count on. No one sees their weaknesses. No one believes they have any. They're just always there, doing what you expect of them. Then, when they're... gone, you realize what a big hole they've left, and you don't know how to fill it. It's really kind of unfair--they often go unappreciated during their lives.

She looked around her at the barren landscape. "We've spent twelve years on this world. That's the longest I've ever lived anywhere. When we finally ran out of options for getting the *Jupiter* off the ground... when we buried John here... I thought it was some kind of sign that this was where I was meant to spend the rest of my life... with him. I've often wondered if I could... bring myself to leave--this place... or John."

"Granddaddy's not under there," said Rob quietly. "He's in us." More urgently, he added, "If you stay here, you'll die."

She sighed. "Rob, I'm just so tired."

From the other side of one of the planet's omnipresent igneous rocks, a voice, aged but still strong, blared, "That's quite enough!"

Dr. Zachary Smith stepped into view, inclining his head respectfully toward Maureen, though his expression was nothing but reproachful. He'd accompanied Rob here, as he

accompanied him everywhere, just as he'd accompanied Will for years. Will had grown up, and Rob had taken his place at Smith's side, if not in Smith's heart.

"See here," he sniffed, wagging an arthritic finger. "My good woman, you are coming back to the ship with us, and we'll hear no more of this."

"Doctor Smith--" Maureen began.

"Don't interrupt when an expert is speaking, madam. I'm quite aware of your feelings. They are to be expected, brought on, as they are, by a series of unresolved traumas. You need a catharsis," he said firmly. "And dying here is most certainly not the catharsis you need." He smiled beatifically and added, "Trust your doctor."

Despite herself, despite the gravity of the situation and of her thoughts, she couldn't help but laugh. He often had that effect on her--when she didn't want to wring his neck. She stood, reached out, hugged him.

"I'll go back to the ship with you, to give my regards to our guests. I'm not making any promises."

Smith smiled. "That will do... for now."

Maureen encircled Rob in her free arm and pulled him along. Together, they walked toward the campsite.

It had been over a decade since any of them had seen the clean disc of the *Jupiter II* up on its landing legs, ready for space. Since they'd originally crash-landed on this un-named world, she'd rested, half buried, right where she'd fallen. Now the spidery legs of force field generating units held her as though in the palm of a giant hand, and she floated inches off the ground, several hundred feet from the crater that had been her foundation. The force fields would lift the small ship, protect her from the stresses and strains of being towed through the atmosphere, and carry her to the Robinson's new home--the imperial seat of the benefactors' mighty civilization.

Beaming, Dr. Smith announced, "The Leader intends us to ride in his personal flagship, as," he looked distastefully at the *Jupiter*, "that pile of rubbish isn't fit for space travel any longer."

Rob started to reprimand Smith for his lack of proper sentiment regarding the *Jupiter II*, but was interrupted by the appearance, from within the ship, of the Robinson's benefactor. He climbed down the ladder of the landing gear, somehow making the simple task look both intensely masculine and extremely regal. Striding to them, the man now known simply as "The Leader" favored Maureen with a smile that betrayed a touch of the little boy he had been not so very long ago.

"Mrs. Robinson, I was beginning to fear you had decided to stay behind," he said lightly. Smith winced at his remark.

"I may yet," she said evenly.

The Leader raised an eyebrow in surprise, but controlled any deeper display of feeling, as he had long been trained to do. "You earth people have such a strange sense of humor," he observed. "I never know when you are sincere. Still, you are being foolish if you mean such a thing. It's fated that you leave. My religion would certainly say so. Just think--you were stranded here, your ship beyond all repair, when allies from decades past arrived to observe the

sun's supernova, and found you here. Such blatant coincidence is the signature of the supreme deity."

Maureen half-smiled. "That's a very clear-cut way of looking at things, your Excellency."

"My people do not believe in sentiment, or vagary." Then, more gently, he added, "And I remember a time when you called me Quano. I wish you still would."

"I'm only an old woman. Why should I be privileged?"

"Because," said a voice behind Maureen, "you and your family precipitated many changes in the way our rulers govern." She turned, already having recognized the voice as belonging to Quano's father. One of the more civilized aspects of Quano's civilization--while it was extremely patriarchal--was that it did not insist upon its hereditary leaders remaining in power until they were old and infirm, awaiting death.

Indeed, the retired Leader looked to be in the same robust health he'd been in when the Robinsons had first met him over two decades earlier. He stood before Maureen, bowed, and offered her one of his rare smiles. It enlivened an already strong face, she reflected. He really was quite a handsome man.

"My son learned, from your example, that women are neither weak, nor incompetent."

"Thank you. Coming from you, that means quite a bit."

He chuckled. "My people are not so backward as you might believe, Mrs. Robinson. We are simply very... traditional. In fact, it is the result of one of our traditions that brings me to see you now, before we leave. I was very saddened to learn of the death of your husband. He was a worthy man--both as ally and opponent. My people are warriors. We appreciate our opponents."

"I'm sure John felt the same about you."

"It pleases me to believe so. At any rate, warriors understand that some opponents must always lose. Often they die. Our tradition teaches that a noble opponent's wisdom should not be lost to the universe, even if he loses a battle. We therefore make a record of that opponent's personality--an engram, as your people call it."

"Are you saying you made such a ... record of John?" she asked carefully.

"Naturally. He was an opponent. In addition to preserving his individuality in the event I had killed him, the record would have allowed me--indeed, often *did* allow me--to avail myself of his cunning and wisdom, and to practice my skills against a simulacrum of him."

"Your Excellency," Dr. Smith interrupted, "are you saying you've been... speaking to Professor Robinson for two decades?"

"On occasion, yes. Oh, not Professor Robinson himself--merely a holographic simulation of him."

"But... how...?" Maureen muttered, shaken by what was being proposed.

Quano lifted the amulet that hung about his neck, a mate to the one his father wore.

"With this. The amulet is not merely a decoration. It is a transceiver, constantly in contact with the computer resources of our homeworld."

"I believe your husband recognized it as such when we first met," observed his father.

"During the course of our first... encounter, it transmitted all observed data on Professor Robinson to our central computer archive, where it remains to this day."

"Fascinating," observed Smith, "an interactive memorial."

"Just so," agreed Quano's father. "And one which will permit me to offer you, Mrs. Robinson--and all of your family--a gift of welcome to my family's empire."

They gathered in the *Jupiter's* control room, around the dome of the now-useless astrogator. The whole family was there--Smith and the Robot included. And Quano and his father were there. The Father--Maureen knew of nothing else to call him, for he was no longer the Leader--the Father had explained the specifics of his "gift" to them all.

Now he stood in the center of the circle they'd formed, lifting the amulet on its chain about his neck. He looked gently at Maureen. "Are you ready, Mrs. Robinson?"

After a moment, she nodded, and he gently manipulated the dial that encircled the jeweled center of the disc. The jewel illuminated subtly, and, though no beam or visible support emanated from it, a column of light flared into being a meter or so from the Father. It wavered, coruscated, then began to assume shape and color. It turned to face Maureen, and its form solidified.

Maureen felt her knees buckle. She grabbed onto Will's arm for support. Her husband was looking her in the eye, smiling.

It was impossible to think of him as "John's image," for there was no flaw in the illusion, no way to discern that this was not, in fact, John Robinson. Though Quano and his father had met John when he was young, their computer's image of him was aged in keeping with the Robinson's last memory of him: still strong, still vital, his hair grey, the mustache he'd grown in later years feathering over his lip. It was still hard to believe, looking at him, that the heart that had supported this man was too weak to continue his life, that this was the image of the man they'd found that morning, who'd slipped so quietly away in his sleep.

"Hello darling," he said. He looked about him, surveying the faces of his family. "It's so good to see all of you again."

Don West looked sideways at the Father and whispered, "Does it... he... *know*?"

John Robinson smiled. "Do I *know*, Don? You mean do I know I'm dead? Of course I do. I'm not likely to forget a thing like that, am I? I'm a *computer*. I've got a better mind for facts than I ever had. I know all that's happened to you since my death."

"How can you speak of your own death so calmly, then?" asked Judy. "Or doesn't this... image of you have feelings?"

The image walked toward her, reached out, and took Judy's hand in both of his own. Maureen could tell by the look on her eldest daughter's face that the hands had substance, or at least its illusion. Judy gazed wonderingly into her father's eyes.

"I often wondered, during my life, if our feelings weren't more than just the collection of our knowledge and experience. If our memories didn't make up all of our personality. We like to believe that we're more than the sum of our knowledge, but... Judy, I'm in here. I *feel* the love I always felt for you. For all of you."

"Is it so unbelievable that an artificial intelligence can have feelings?" asked the crackling monotone. The Robot came forward, data input and system activity lights flashing as he scanned the new arrival.

John smiled at him. "No, old friend. I've believed it of you for many years. Just as Will always did."

John turned and faced his son, their youngest child. Will studied him carefully, not allowing himself to be overwhelmed by the emotions he must surely feel at seeing his father again. "If this... copy of you is so reliable, can it--"

"Can I stay with you in this form permanently? No, son. The power consumption is too

great. The processing resources required, also, would drain the Leader's computer systems. I suppose the Empire could maintain a few like me, but who would choose who became immortal? Besides, this is just a limited demonstration. My program is reacting to this specific situation. The setup for it took days to compile. There's no way I could react on the spur of the moment to a new situation. I'm more like... a very sophisticated, self-aware photograph."

He paused a moment. "That doesn't change the fact that I'm proud of the man you've become, Will. Your mother and I often wondered if we'd done the right thing, bringing you into space to grow up, facing a hostile environment. You didn't have the advantages that other children did."

"I wouldn't have wanted them," Will said quietly.

"And it's clear you didn't need them. It may just be you thrived on the difficulty of our circumstances. I know it's an old, macho cliché, but I think every man wants a son to carry on his name. I know you'll do that, and do it great honor."

He turned and stepped over to Penny, who was not controlling her feelings. Quiet tears ran down her face. John reached out and brushed them away with an artificially projected hand. "Penny," he said. "If I have one regret, it's that I didn't live to see your children. I've always known you'd be a wonderful mother, with your compassion for all living things, your warmth and humor--"

Penny chuckled. "The playing field was a little limited out here, Dad--until now. That wasn't your fault."

"Are you sure," he asked, his eyes twinkling, "that I didn't engineer it so I'd never have competition for my little girl?"

Penny laughed, as he'd always been able to make her.

Don, Judy and Rob stood together, a family unit within the family.

"Major West," said John. "I trust you're fulfilling your command responsibilities?"

Don shrugged. "I dunno, Doc. You left me a pretty big mess here."

"I can think of no one better to bail my family out of a mess. We'd have been dead the first day of the trip if not for your skill. You've been everything I could ask for in an assistant, a friend, a son. Take care of them."

"I'll do that."

"Rob... I think you've grown a foot."

"Two inches. It hasn't been that long." The boy paused, then looked at his feet, clearly trying to keep his voice from breaking. "I miss you, Granddaddy."

John reached out and squeezed Rob's shoulder. "I'm always here--and not just in an alien memory bank. You know that, don't you?"

Rob nodded.

"Of all the things we've accomplished in space, Robinson, you are by far our greatest achievement. You are the future of our family. Never forget what that means."

"I won't."

A few feet from Maureen stood Zachary Smith, the man who'd caused their ship to go off course a quarter of a century before, who'd caused them to be hopelessly lost to their own people, who'd tried, any number of times, to kill them, or betray them for his own personal gain. He looked apprehensive as John approached him. Dr. Smith was afraid of many things--if not everything; but Maureen knew he feared John Robinson most of all. John was the essence of the

strength, the moral conviction, the courage that Smith lacked.

It was characteristic of the man John Robinson was, of the beliefs his entire life had represented, that he had never allowed himself to hate Zachary Smith. In fact, at this particular moment, his computer-generated self looked on the old man with considerable fondness.

"Dr. Smith," asked John, "have you arranged an appointment as Grand Vizier to the Leader yet?"

Smith's eyebrows raised. Just for a moment, it was clear he was considering John's suggestion. "Actually, Professor, I'm looking forward to a quiet retirement. His Excellency," he looked sideways at Quano, "has assured me that the women of his planet will provide me great comfort."

"They will love him," confirmed Quano. "He will be the first man they've ever seen who is as soft and emotional as they are."

"I'll bet he's a better cook than any of them though," said John. Then his expression became solemn. "Doctor Smith, you would never have been my first choice as a fellow castaway. I won't go into the motives that prompted you to be among us at the outset, but we both know you have been guilty of excessive greed and pettiness."

"Well--" Smith began.

John held up a hand. "That's all right, Doctor. You needn't say anything. When I first met you, there was a vengeful part of me that would have tossed you out the airlock as soon as look at you. Vengeance is not a thing I was raised to believe is the purview of humans, however. I can't say my tolerance of you wasn't sometimes grudging.

"After these past decades, however, I must say that I've observed many positive qualities within you as well--qualities which I believe have grown. It's clear to me that you truly loved my children, and my grandchild. You might not have intended it to be that way, but it happened. And they love you, every bit as much. In a very dangerous, frightening place, you gave my family companionship, laughter, and, yes, a great deal of love. You wouldn't have been my first choice; but, like it or not, you're a member of my family."

For once in his life, Smith was speechless. He simply stared as John moved to face the final member of his family, the first member of his family. For a long time, he only looked at her, as if drinking in her essence. She wondered what a computer-generated replica of her husband could gain by staring at her. Perhaps it was a programmed response, part of the extensive rendering performed by the Leader's programmers in preparation for this encounter. She could easily let herself believe, however, that John's soul saw through those holographic eyes, and was looking on her one last time.

"Maureen," he said slowly, and he took her hands, pulling them close to his chest. She hadn't known what to expect of this contact--perhaps a mild, electrical tingle, a coldness. The illusion was a perfect one, though. The hands felt like John's, right down to the callouses he'd earned in the early months on Priplanis.

"John," she whispered.

"I don't know how you feel about this... form of communication, darling. I don't know if you can bring yourself to believe that these are truly our last words together in this life."

"I--"

He brought a hand to her face, caressing her hair. "No, let me finish. My memories don't include the last twenty-some years. I'm complete only up to the time we met the Leader and

Quano. I'm missing some very important data."

"What, John?"

"They say I died in my sleep."

"Yes, dear. I don't believe you felt a thing." She felt silly after she'd said that. What difference could it make to an interactive program?

"The night before--when we went to bed... I don't know if I told you that I love you?"

She blinked to clear the tears that were stinging her eyes. "Of course you did, darling. You always did."

He nodded, looking profoundly relieved. "I just had to be sure. I love you, Maureen. Since the first moment I saw you, all those years ago, my overriding desire has been to be a part of your life, to be your husband. If I had one wish, if I had to give up everything else in my life, I would have wished simply to be married to you, to build the family we built together.

"I couldn't have done it with anyone else, darling. I certainly couldn't have done it alone. They say pride is a sin, but in this case it's one I'll allow myself. I'm proud beyond all reason of the fact that you chose me to be the father of your children, and to be by your side for the rest of my life.

"I don't know where my real soul is. I firmly believe that I'm alive in another place. The Lord wouldn't make so glorious a creation as a human intelligence and let it go to waste by just winking out of existence one night. But I know one thing: wherever my soul resides, it's at peace. It knows that you are leading our family into the future, facing whatever danger comes your way with that amazing reserve of strength you've always had.

"I can't bring myself to be worried that any of you have to make it without me; because, Maureen, anything I could do, you could do a hundred times better. I know they're all safe with you." He squeezed her hand tightly in his, then used the hand on her neck to pull her face to his. The illusion was truly perfect. The kiss he gave her was as warm and as full of love as any he'd ever given before.

"Goodbye, Maureen," he said gently. "I'll see you again... soon."

She muttered feebly, "Goodbye," as his image faded from view. She could say nothing more. All her words were lost to tears.

Penny came forward. "Mom? You okay?"

Through a sob, Maureen nodded.

The Father, to her left, said quietly, "She will be fine, child. She has experienced much today."

Maureen looked up at him, noticing, not for the first time, his handsome, strong features. "Thanks to you, your Excellence. On behalf of my family... thank you. No gift could have greater meaning to us."

Uncharacteristically, he placed a supportive arm about her shoulders. Despite the fact that he was so aged as to have retired from the leadership of his people, his body was firm, his muscles hard--very much like John's. Perhaps, she thought, the similarities did not end there.

"It is the least we could do," he said, smiling.

"No," she shook her head. "Hardly the least. You've shown me that... I have a purpose in the rest of my life. I have a job to do, and I have people counting on me... here, and in the world that comes after this one. I'll go with you, your Excellence, as John would have wanted."

There was a collective sigh of relief from her family, and even from Quano. The Father

placed his hands on both her shoulders. "You know that I once considered women unworthy. I'm beginning to realize that that is because my culture has never produced a woman like you. I hope, from now on, it will learn to do so."

"As do I," said Quano.

"Thank you," said Maureen. "You know, it occurs to me, I don't know your name."

"Once he is ordained, and until the end of his life," said Quano, "the name of the leader may only be spoken by his father... and those rare individuals he might call equal."

The Father nodded. "My son speaks the truth. None but my own father has spoken my name for many decades. Not even Quano's mother knew it. I never met my equal."

He was silent as he looked at her for a long moment. Then he added, "When we return home, in less public circumstances, I may tell you my name. It's possible that, at long last, I have found the one I wish to share it with."

Maureen returned his smile, looking from him to each of the members of her family, and to a future of infinite possibilities.



STAR TREK

Endings And Beginnings

by Mary Rottler and Lynn Syck

"So, what is your deepest fear, Jim?"

Kirk jerked his gaze from the campfire to stare at McCoy. "What?"

McCoy's blue eyes held his own. "You know what mine is and Spock's, thanks to Sybok. It seems only fair that you tell us yours."

A frown creased his forehead, his irritation building moment by moment with the Doctor. For some reason McCoy had chosen tonight to bug the hell out of him. He cast about for what could have caused his friend to be so out of sorts.

Picking up on the vacation they had been forced to abort for the unscheduled trip to Nimbus Three, the three were camped at the base of a cavern containing ancient ruins on Brett Colony, a world settled by Earth colonists several hundred years ago. Surprisingly, the suggestion to continue their shoreleave had come from Spock. He had been extended an invitation by the archaeologists based here to investigate signs of the Preservers at this site. Commander Scott had beamed the three of them here earlier in the day and was taking the Enterprise on a routine supply run. He was to return to pick them up in four days time.

"Well?" McCoy pushed.

A snappy retort died on his lips as Kirk saw Spock's dark eyes watching him. Taking a sip of coffee, Kirk forced a neutral tone. "I don't know quite how to answer that, Bones. I do know that I find it disturbing to discover that both of you have kept things from me that are extremely important to you."

"You knew my father died. There wasn't anything you could do about it."

Kirk shifted, trying to find a comfortable position. "I know." He stopped, remembering McCoy's pain-filled voice when watching his father die under Sybok's mind influence. "I'm not sure which hurt worse--watching you suffer there or knowing that you experienced this and never told me."

"Captain, your statement surprises me. Am I correct in assuming you are angry with Doctor McCoy regarding his father?" Spock's quizzical expression was reminiscent of past missions. Normally, Kirk was amused by the innocent countenance but all he felt now was exasperation.

"Of course not." Kirk snapped.

Spock apparently decided to ignore the nonverbal warning to back off the subject. Kirk clenched his jaw, again reminded of the old Spock of many years before. When he was intent on discovering the root of a problem, he was oblivious to human emotions. "Doctor, if my memory serves, your father died not long after I returned to Vulcan for my Kolinar training and the Captain became Chief of Operations."

McCoy looked up briefly from the fire, "Yes."

Spock leaned forward, a frown replacing his curiosity. "Am I correct in stating that

communications between you were not at an optimum?"

Abruptly, Kirk stood. "What's your point, Spock?"

He knew he must be imagining the glimmer of pain in Spock's dark eyes as the Vulcan said, "I believe I am partially responsible for that division between you."

For a suspended moment, Kirk remained frozen as the memory of hurtful, angry words hurled at McCoy so many years ago echoed in the air around them. Spock was right, Kirk had been devastated by his friend's choice to return to Vulcan. When McCoy had chosen to oppose and fight his own promotion, Kirk had seen it as betrayal. By both Spock and McCoy.

He had never felt so alone in his life.

Except when Spock died.

Kirk felt his chest tighten, angry now at both of his friends. Dammit, they were on a camping trip to enjoy themselves, not to reminisce about times that he did not want to think about. Next, McCoy would be asking him to talk about David. Kirk tossed the last of his coffee on the ground. "I'm going for a walk."

"In the desert, at night?" McCoy threw at him. "Just to avoid talking? Thought you were angry with me for not telling you about my father. What's the difference? You won't talk to us."

Already striding out of the sphere of the campfire, Kirk spun on his heel. Not sure why, the Captain only knew he was furious with both McCoy and Spock. "Talk? McCoy you know more about my psyche than I do. Every time something happens to me, I'm required to talk with you. There's nothing about me that's private. In the past, you knew how it felt for me to be split into two people, to turn into a woman, to be tortured, to watch people I love die. I've shared nearly everything with the two of you. At first, because I was forced to and then because I wanted to. Now, I find out that you've both held out on me. Spock has done it for years." He glared at the Vulcan. "Remember Spock, putting me in the embarrassing position of not realizing the Ambassador was your father? So far, you didn't think it was important to tell me about T'Pring, your parents, T'Pau and now Sybok. Come to think of it, you really never explained about Saavik either." Kirk was unable to stop the torrent of words or to control his shaking anger. "Do you suppose Bones, he has a wife and child at home and we don't know it?"

He did not wait for a reply, knowing that the last thing he wanted to hear was Spock's calm voice placating him. Heading out of the campground, Kirk plunged down a nearby dry riverbed.

McCoy swore under his breath and glared at Kirk's retreating back. Solemn brown eyes lifted to meet his across the fire.

The Doctor resisted the urge to shout after the captain. Instead, he grabbed a stick, shoving it angrily into the fire. It caused a burst of flame which sent sparks in the Vulcan's direction. Spock moved back without comment.

"Sorry." McCoy forced himself to drop the stick and his anger at the same time. He glanced at Spock with a grin. "So, do you?"

There was a moment's pause before Spock replied. "No, I do not have a wife or a child."

"Any other brothers or sisters we don't know about?"

"No. I could provide you with a genealogical history if you would like."

McCoy shook his head. "No, wouldn't be any fun. Besides, that's not the problem. Jim is. Something's eating at him."

"He is hurt. I get glimpses but he will not allow me to help." Spock glanced at the empty trail. "There are barriers between us that I do not understand."

The Doctor was surprised by Spock's admission. He knew the Vulcan was referring to Kirk's mental anguish rather than any physical pain. "I didn't expect him to lash out at us like that. I should have though. Nothing in Jim's world has been very stable in the last few months." He caught the dark eyes staring at him. "First he lost you and thought he was losing me."

Again, Spock turned to stare into the darkness where Kirk had disappeared. "And in saving me, he was forced to sacrifice his son and the Enterprise."

"And his career." McCoy found another stick and shoved over a log in the fire. "When he needed to talk the most, I was incapacitated and you were with the Vulcan Healers. Since then, there's been very little time."

Spock's brows drew together as he stared at the fire. Drawing a breath, he asked, "Am I correct in understanding that the discovery of my brother and the revelations Sybok forced from us were a form of betrayal to Jim."

"I think he sees it that way. Then I went a step further and nearly sided with Sybok against him."

Spock must have heard the self-recrimination in his voice. McCoy shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. Every so often, the nagging fear that they were still psychically connected despite or because of that damned Fal Tor Pan made the hairs on his neck rise. He had noticed too often lately that Spock was more sensitive to his feelings. He wasn't about to admit that vice versa was true or that he had known when Spock's surprise had turned to confusion and pain during Kirk's tirade a few minutes ago.

"Sybok is to blame for that, not you. It is the reason his name was stricken from all recorded Vulcan history and it was forbidden to speak it. Do you understand now why I have not spoken of him before, not only because of the ruling but because he leaves nothing but pain in his wake?"

"Even for you." He did not have to see Spock's nod to know he acknowledged the comment.

They lapsed back into silence. McCoy forced himself to relax, watching the dancing flames before him. If he were honest, he had to admit that this rapport between him and Spock was also affecting Jim. Their relationship was altered slightly, McCoy feeling awkward that he was more relaxed at times with Spock than Kirk seemed to be lately. It was frustrating that with all of his psychological skills, he had so far been unable to talk freely with Jim about the rapport. That meant McCoy had to openly acknowledge its existence.

His eyelids were growing heavy when he heard the sound of Kirk's footsteps crunching the dry ground as the captain returned to the campsite.

Returning to the fire, Kirk accepted a cup of coffee from Spock. The captain glanced at McCoy, holding one hand out toward the warmth of the fire. "Temperature's dropping. It's getting cooler."

McCoy made a non-committal sound, raising an eyebrow in reply. Damned if he was going to open any more conversations tonight. Spock could try if he wanted.

Soothing, gentle sounds drifted toward them as Spock started strumming lightly on his lyre. McCoy felt some of his annoyance at Kirk fade away as the soft chords floated around him leaving a melancholy sadness in its wake.

He heard Kirk say softly to Spock, "Are you just going to strum that thing all night or play something on it?"

McCoy risked a glance at Kirk just as the Vulcan started playing the simple round they had tried to teach Spock a few weeks before. The Captain broke into a joyful smile, his eyes dancing with gentle laughter. McCoy looked away, not wanting to intrude on the shared moment.

The flames danced in front of him, and McCoy stared into them, distancing himself from his two friends. He wondered if he was losing the fine edge he used to have with Kirk.

Faintly, he heard Spock and Kirk singing, their voices interweaving softly, sharing almost intimately their trust and friendship.

There was a tap on his leg, pulling him back from his contemplation. He looked over to find Kirk's twinkling eyes asking him to join in the round. McCoy glanced at Spock, not missing the soft sparkle in the brown eyes before the Vulcan bent his head back to his lyre.

They sang several rounds, enjoying the magic circle of love that surrounded them. But then McCoy faltered as he glanced back at the relaxed, open face of his Captain. Considering his actions only a few days before when he had so nearly been swayed to side with Sybok against Kirk, the Doctor found that he questioned his own ability to help the Captain. No wonder Kirk was angry with him. McCoy shook his head in wonder at his own actions. He did not agree with Spock that he could blame Sybok. He had always taken responsibility for his own actions.

Kirk stopped singing, turning puzzled eyes toward him. Eyes that changed to concern and then wariness. McCoy cringed, feeling Spock's eyes on him also, was unable to explain.

"I'm worn out. I'm going to turn in." McCoy withdrew from them, knowing that he had effectively destroyed the mood for all three of them yet his own confusion forced him to retreat to his own company.

Long into the night, Spock contemplated both McCoy's and Kirk's actions. He sensed pain and confusion from both his friends, in fact had become acutely aware of it since the mission with Sybok. The resonance between them at times vibrated with the buried emotions, driving Spock to suggest a retreat to this secluded area in his desire to aid both men and work through his own questions.

In years past, Spock knew he would have avoided such an attempt to reach out to his friends and share their pain. The experiences in the last few months had changed him. Knowing the many trials that both his friends had gone through to save his own life, Spock could not turn his back on an opportunity to assist them, even if it meant traveling down paths that were unfamiliar or uncomfortable for him. A moment of doubt assailed him at his own reasoning, wondering if it was truly due to his own experiences or if it were possible that his recent interactions with Sybok were influencing his behavior patterns.

He opened his eyes, seeking out the stars to retreat from the thought. McCoy had been right when he stated earlier that Sybok had caused him much pain as well.

Dawn was pushing the darkness of the night away when he heard McCoy climb out of his sleeping bag and leave the campsite. Attempting to not disturb Kirk who seemed to be sleeping, Spock quietly moved about the campsite. Thirty minutes went by and still McCoy did not return.

Kirk sat up, a grey shape in the early morning dusk. He climbed stiffly out of his own bag

and stood beside the dead fire shivering.

With his bedpack already neatly rolled, Spock retrieved both of their jackets. Kirk took his with a soft grunt and shrugged into its warmth.

As the Captain started working on the campfire, Spock gathered up McCoy's jacket. "I shall check on the Doctor."

Kirk straightened, grimacing with the motion. "He should be back soon. You know how grumpy he is in the morning. I doubt he wants company."

"Nevertheless, I will give him the opportunity to tell me so."

Kirk took a step closer, peering intently at Spock. "Are you sensing something's wrong?"

Spock allowed an eyebrow to rise in his surprise. Kirk had never before alluded to the resonance between him and McCoy. "No. However, like you, he is troubled."

The Captain looked away from his gaze. "I'll get breakfast started."

Spock watched for a moment as Kirk gathered the supplies for breakfast. Even though he sensed he was the key to both his friends' difficulties, he was unused to being the one to attempt to interpret human emotional entanglements. He took a step closer to Kirk, drawing his attention. "Jim, does the resonance that I share with McCoy present a difficulty for you?"

Even in the early morning light, Spock could see the Captain's surprise and bewilderment at the question.

Kirk's answer was quick and short, his eyes narrowing in anger. "No, why should it?"

Inclining his head briefly, Spock replied before retreating, "Forgive me, I did not mean to intrude. I have noticed a reluctance on your part to acknowledge that it exists. I meant no criticism."

Spock was nearly out of their camping area when Kirk called his name.

"Spock, it isn't reluctance . . . really. It's more that I felt like it would be intruding on your privacy."

"Interesting." Spock shifted McCoy's coat. "Would you not agree that you experience a degree of discomfort with the fact that there is a resonance between McCoy and me?"

Kirk rose slowly from where he knelt by the fire, taking a step toward Spock. His voice was disbelieving. "Did I hear you right? Are you accusing me of being -- that I resent it?"

Spock frowned, knowing his expression was hidden by the early morning dusk from Kirk's human vision. This was why he did not enter the arena of the human psyche. There were too many layers and tracks that constantly interwove. Even a mind as disciplined and structured as the Captain's took confusing turns when emotion was involved.

"The terminology I employed was discomfort. I did not intend to intimate any other emotion."

The tension between them eased as Kirk chuckled unexpectedly. "Of course not, Mr. Spock. I apologize for the misinterpretation. Go on, find McCoy. I'll get breakfast started."

Spock soon returned with a grumbling McCoy in tow. After a quick breakfast, the three were soon headed toward the huge ruin built high in the side of a cliff. Steep paths with steps carved into a sheer wall were the only access to the ruin, causing McCoy to aim his barbs at Spock.

"Did you have to choose something that would encourage Jim to keep imitating a mountain goat? He may enjoy it but I don't."

Kirk looked down from a ledge halfway to their destination, waiting for them to join him. "And you're damned slow at it too, Bones. Getting old, I'd say."

Again, the tension flared between them. The normal byplay of teasing between them was ending more frequently in anger. McCoy paused on one of the ancient steps to glare up at Kirk. "Damned right. I am too old to keep playing your games."

Spock debated the wisdom of reminding the Doctor that this expedition had been his own idea, not the Captain's. Silence seemed to be the wiser decision.

Kirk gave McCoy a hand over the ledge, the tension disappearing between them. They continued to the huge temple ruin carved into the side of the sheer cliff. All three took in the awesome sight of the ruins of a long dead civilization which, using only primitive handmade tools, had managed a feat that modern day people would find difficult. They had barely stepped across the threshold when someone called to the Vulcan.

"Honored Spock? We have been looking forward to your visit. Are these your assistants?" A wizened old Andorian with straggly, yellowed hair scurried toward them, barely glancing at McCoy and Kirk. The Andorian looked over his shoulder, shouting, "Sir Timberlake! Hurry up! He's here!"

Spock did not miss the amused look exchanged between Kirk and McCoy as the little man introduced himself as Terizol. His antennae nearly touched Spock's chest as he bobbed in a ludicrous bow before the Vulcan.

Nodding gravely in return, Spock replied slowly, hoping to calm the excited Andorian. "As you have surmised, I am Spock of Vulcan. These are my . . ." he paused just long enough for McCoy to glare at him. "--my companions, Doctor McCoy and Captain Kirk."

Terizol did not react to their names, his attention still focused on Spock. He was already urging him toward two huge carved pillars which framed an entryway to the inside of the cavern. "Come. We have finally discovered evidence that the Preservers were here. A cave-in covered it up before. Richard thinks that may have happened over a thousand years ago." His hands were waving excitedly in the air. He addressed Kirk and McCoy for the first time. "It was Honored Spock who convinced the Federation to reinvestigate this site for the presence of the Preservers. They blocked our request at first because the colonies here are protected by the Federation, not members. Honored Spock interceded on our behalf."

Embarrassed, Spock let out a nearly imperceptible sigh at the little man's hero-worship. He heard McCoy clear his throat, and saw Kirk quickly elbow the Doctor in the ribs.

"Honored Terizol, please show me what you have found," Spock requested, hoping to forestall any more conversation.

The little man nodded and setting a fast pace he started to lead them through the opening into the main cave, not allowing them time to view the ruins as they passed by. Spock could see Kirk and McCoy craning their necks as they passed through the wide, ornate opening. The little man continued hurrying toward a smaller opening across from the first cavern, bypassing intricately carved statues and primitive wall paintings.

The Vulcan stopped, clearing his throat. "Terizol, we have never been to this particular ruin. Would you explain the artifacts here?"

The Andorian turned, his entire demeanor changing, "Forgive me. I assumed you had visited here before." Taking the group back to the entrance, Terizol proceeded to give a thorough tour, lecturing in a soft whispery voice that soon had McCoy yawning.

A gruff voice cut across the dry lecture, catching the small group by surprise. "Dammit, Terizol, how long does it take for you to get the--" A burly man was stepping through the doorway that led to the inner sanctum. Instead of appearing pleased to see Spock, he frowned, glaring at both Kirk and McCoy.

"Ahhhh Richard, you've come to greet our guests. This is Honored Spock and his assistants, Kirk and McCoy." Terizol hurried over to stand at the annoyed man's side. "This is Sir Richard Timberlake."

Spock stepped forward, attempting to dispel the appellation. "Sir Richard, I am honored to meet you. However, these are my companions, not my assistants."

The man stepped closer, still not pleased to see them. He studied both Kirk and McCoy, his displeasure rolling off him in waves. "Starfleet. I didn't approve any fleters here. Only you, Spock. Come on, then. See if you can make sense of any of this."

Without waiting for an answer, he headed back to the inner doorway. Uncertainly, the three men followed, but as they started through the opening, Timberlake's arm barred Kirk and McCoy's progress. "I approved only Spock. No one else."

"Sir, I explained I would be accompanied. They will not--"

Timberlake gave a shake of his head, his uncut mop of brown hair bouncing wildly. "No."

Kirk touched Spock's arm. "Go ahead. There's plenty for us to explore out here."

He knew that Kirk was aware of Sir Richard's well known work, the man was a legend in the world of archaeologists. Spock had been forewarned that the human was sometimes eccentric and his behavior here was proving the veracity of the description.

McCoy chimed in, "Go. You've been dying to see this. And it gives me an opportunity to avoid caves. I'm about as fond of them as I am of rock climbing."

Sighing, Spock turned and followed the two archaeologists through the inner sanctum.

Kirk followed McCoy back outside the main cavern, to the area Terizol explained was the communal area for the tribe to gather for work or telling stories. Both men automatically sought the warming rays of the sun. Rubbing his arms, McCoy griped, "It's too damned cold in there."

The Captain ignored him, wandering closer to the edge of the cliff. The land was mostly dry sand with short, squatty trees which sparsely dotted the surface. Far to the left, mountains broke the monotony of the flat desert. The climate had changed dramatically in this continent over the past hundreds of years and it was no longer capable of sustaining sentient life. Even the very few desert animals were barely able to survive the arid conditions. The colonists had been some of the first to have left Earth. They lived simply on one large land mass on the southern portion of the planet, choosing to no longer engage in space flight or modern technology.

McCoy sat on the ground, leaning back against the cave wall beside one of the pillars. He chuckled, "Did you hear the disdain in Sir Richard's voice for us 'Fleters'?"

Still looking over the edge, Kirk nodded. "Irony, I think. He'd be the first one to call for help from Starfleet and expect it even though he acts like we're not good enough to shine his boots."

"Jim, you're going to give me a heart attack. Move away from there." McCoy complained.

Kirk turned, hands on his hips. "Is it my imagination, or are your phobias increasing with age?"

McCoy glared at him, not replying to his taunt. The Captain moved to join the Doctor, craning his head to look up at the overhang far above them. "How'd they do that, Bones? Those carvings up there? I don't see any way to get to them."

"Beats me. Makes me think we may be the savages." McCoy stared at the ceiling for all a few minutes before becoming distracted. Rummaging in his backpack, he handed a protein bar out to Kirk, opening one for himself. "Assistants are allowed to eat, aren't they?"

Taking the offering, Kirk glanced over his shoulder at the entryway. "Not if Sir Richard has his way. I think he would have preferred we vacate the area, not necessarily down the route we came up."

After eating an early lunch and washing it down with water, they spent the next few hours exploring the outer parts of the ruin. There were living quarters constructed of a material similar to sandstone, shaped into rectangular blocks with mortar between the blocks made of mud and water. The rooms were large enough for two to three persons. According to Terizol's earlier lecture, there were over two hundred rooms built into the sides of the cavern, which include several deep pits covered with a roof of beams and mud which was conjectured to be used for ceremonies such as healing rites.

McCoy tired of the exploring before Kirk. "I've about had enough of looking at dead stuff for a while." He moved to look out over the land, staying well back from the sheer drop below the ledge. "This isn't the most hospitable land. Are you sure we want to stay here for three days?"

Moving silently behind the Doctor, Kirk slapped him on the shoulder. "I'm hoping Sir Richard will relax some and let us inside to see the real stuff. It should be more interesting then."

McCoy shook his head. "I wouldn't hold my breath."

"Well, if it doesn't work, we have an invitation to visit one of the villages on the mainland. We can stay there while Spock completes his investigation."

McCoy's face brightened. "I've heard about Brett colony all my life, but they're so private, I never thought we'd have the chance to visit. Why didn't you tell me before? I would have gone straight there." He frowned suddenly. "By the way, just how do we get there without the Enterprise? They don't have transporters."

Kirk patted his communicator. "There's an orbiting automatic space station which the archeologists live in. With the proper code, we can access the transporter station there and then beam to the colony."

McCoy rubbed his hands, "I'm ready now. No more dry rations for me. Let's go--"

A rumble from inside the entrance of the cave drew their attention. Before they could move, the sound increased to a roar, vibrations accompanying it. The shaking ground threw McCoy down and he slid perilously close to the edge of the cliff.

"Bones!" Kirk flattened himself on the ground, ignoring the cracks that were beginning to appear in the rock beneath him. He caught hold of his friend's arms just as part of the ledge disappeared from underneath McCoy. Legs dangling over the edge, the Doctor gripped Kirk's arms tightly. Rocks were falling all around them, the world gone mad as Kirk doggedly pulled McCoy back toward solid ground.

The tremors continued, a jagged tear in the rock opening up, stretching from the ledge under McCoy to Kirk's chest. He glimpsed McCoy's eyes widening with fear as he watched the crack in the earth beneath him begin to widen quickly to encompass his body.

Suddenly, the shaking stopped. Not wasting the opportunity, Kirk pulled McCoy to safety and holding on to each other, they both backed far away from the newly created ledge.

When McCoy got his breath, he attacked. "You didn't tell me they have earthquakes here!"

"I'm not aware that they do." Kirk kept a hand on McCoy's arm having a hard time subduing his own surge of fear at nearly losing his friend. He pulled out his communicator. "Spock!"

Before there could be a reply, the roar returned. The ground shook so violently that they were both thrown to the ground again. Kirk covered his head as rocks pounded down around them. He heard McCoy yell his name, feeling him tug hard on his arm. Something fell across him, pushing the breath out of him. A second later, darkness descended.

The ground had stopped moving but for a moment McCoy was afraid to trust that it would not start again. Covered with rocks, pebbles and dirt, the Doctor shoved his way out from under the rubble, calling out Kirk's name. A few minutes before, he had seen one of the pillars fall, crushing the Captain beneath it.

On wobbly legs, he stood wiping a layer of dirt and blood from his face. His eyes were too gritty to see clearly. "Jim? Can you hear me?"

At first he could see no sign of Kirk underneath the rubble. Then he found a hand. He touched it, "Jim, can you hear me?"

The fingers moved weakly. McCoy squeezed the hand. "We're going to get you out."

A few minutes later, he had most of Kirk's upper torso uncovered. But the legs from the thighs on down were buried beneath the remains of the huge stone pillar that lay across him. McCoy tried to move it, without success.

"Spock?" Kirk whispered.

McCoy was still pushing at the stone. "Let me help you first, then we'll get Spock."

It was not going to budge. McCoy knelt beside Kirk, brushing some of the powdered dirt from his face and eyes. He reached for his medikit on his waistband automatically, pulling the scanner out with heartfelt relief that it had survived with them.

Kirk brushed a hand against his arm. "Call Spock. He was--"

Frowning, McCoy searched quickly around Kirk for the communicator. "Jim, I can't. I don't have mine and you must have lost yours. He's all right. Let me take care of you."

The scanner was already whirling, giving McCoy bits of information. Pulse rapid, blood pressure falling. Cuts, bruises but amazingly, no severe injuries from the head to the hips. Below them, the scanner revealed a crushing injury to the left leg. An artery was severed and seeping, the pressure from the stone was acting as a tourniquet. The right one was broken but not as severe as the left. McCoy rapidly palmed a hypo to counteract the shock but Kirk stopped him again. "Go help Spock, they may need the medicine worse."

"Jim, you need it now. Besides, I'm telling you Spock's fine. I don't know about the others." McCoy ignored the reaching hand to inject the hypo.

"How do you . . . know?" Kirk's face tightened, his breath catching mid-sentence.

Taking the Captain's hand, McCoy kept his eyes away from the lower half of Kirk's body. "Jim, that damned resonance is on hyperdrive. He's not in any distress."

A smile touched the corners of Kirk's mouth at his words. "Add resonance phobia to the

list." The frown faded to a frown. "You're bleeding."

McCoy reached up to his forehead, feeling a jagged tear. In the adrenaline rush, he had not noticed it was there. "It's all right." He returned his attention to the scanner, intending to concentrate on some of the deep cuts on Kirk's upper torso. He had finished closing one wound on Kirk's neck when the Captain captured the device in his hand.

"I still haven't forgotten my emergency medical training, Doctor. I can use this as well as you. Let me fix it so you don't have to keep wiping the blood out of your way." Kirk pointed the device at McCoy's forehead.

The Doctor paused in the act of clearing his face, pulling his hand down to stare at the blood covering it. "Are you afraid you'll be contaminated with my blood, Captain sir?"

Kirk shook his head slightly, grimacing with the motion. He activated the tiny laser. "It'll just take a minute."

Sighing dramatically, McCoy leaned down for Kirk to reach him. "You know I don't like putting myself in the hands of medical incompetents."

It did take a full minute and Kirk's hands began shaking at the last. Handing the device back to McCoy, his arm fell limply to the ground. "I'm afraid it's not as smooth as your normal repairs. It looks a little like a Frankenstein scar."

Glad to have his equipment back in his hands, McCoy touched a finger to the newly formed scar. It did feel a little jagged but the stinging pain that he was just now realizing he had, was gone. He sat back on his heels. "Thanks. It does feel better."

Turning his attention back to a nasty gash in Kirk's arm, McCoy jumped when the sound of the communicator crackled. "Jim! McCoy! This is Spock. I am enroute."

The sound came from somewhere near under the pile of rocks. McCoy searched again but could not locate it. "Spock!" He yelled. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"I can't get the communicator, it's buried." Kirk's hand touched his leg and McCoy asked the question he knew Kirk wanted to hear. "Are you all right?"

"I am uninjured. The area I was in was well protected. However, Terizol is hurt and I am helping him to the surface. Sir Richard panicked and left us, I do not know where he is or his condition."

"We're going to need help with the Captain, a pillar is pinning him and I don't think we can get him out. Try to beam up to the station, find some help and more medical supplies. Mine is limited."

There was a moment of silence. "I have attempted to beam Terizol to the station. The code did not work. It is possible that the signal is interfered with inside the cave. Barring any more blocks in our path, we should arrive there within a half an hour."

McCoy was still facing the huge mound of rock, where he could hear Spock's voice. He felt despair tug at him momentarily, closing his eyes against what Spock's words could possibly mean. No, he would not consider that they were trapped here. He had Spock and Kirk's brilliant minds and his medical wizardry. They would find a way out of this mess.

A dry whisper at his side pulled McCoy back to his patient. "Ask about the earthquake. What it--" His voice broke, Kirk's brows pulling down into a frown.

"Spock, Jim wants to know if that was an earthquake? Do you have any--"

"Negative." The irritation in the deep voice bordered on the edge of emotion. Spock

sounded downright angry. "Sir Richard had indeed discovered the Preservers mechanisms. He activated a beam against my advice since we were unsure of the meaning of the symbols. The vibrations started as soon as this occurred and stopped only when I was able to deactivate it."

Kirk tried to talk loud enough for Spock to hear but McCoy had to repeat the question. "What did it do?"

"Unknown at present."

"He has a theory, Bones. Ask him." Kirk raised his head, dropping it in irritation when the movement apparently caused pain.

"Jim says you have a theory. Spill it, Spock."

"I am unwilling to speculate at this time. I will be there shortly."

Frowning, McCoy turned back to Kirk. The Captain was staring up at him, hazel eyes dark with worry. "It's bad if he's unwilling to talk about it."

McCoy shook his head. "Yeah, well in our science officer's words, worrying is an inefficient utilization of our resources. Let's wait for him to get here to tell us the bad news." He lifted his scanner again, but did not activate it. "How are you doing?"

Kirk did not answer at first. He turned his head slightly to watch the entrance to the main cave. "I couldn't feel him, Bones. I didn't know he was all right."

McCoy sank back on his haunches. This had not been what he was expecting. "You were hurt Jim. That's why--"

Kirk closed his eyes giving a faint shake of his head. "No. I haven't truly felt anything like before from him, since his death. This proves it."

"Jim . . ." he was unsure what to say. This needed to be between Spock and Kirk.

Taking the cue, Kirk whispered, "It's okay, Bones. I just kept hoping everything would be like before--don't tell Spock, he's been so confused around us humans since his refusal, I don't want to add to it."

Most of Spock's confusion usually comes from being around you, Jim-boy, McCoy thought. He rested a hand on Kirk's forehead, brushing his fingers through his hair. Kirk's eyes fluttered open and then closed, and for a while, he slept.

A touch on his shoulder returned McCoy back to full awareness. The cavern swirled dizzily around him for a moment as he looked at Spock, covered in dust from head to foot, kneeling beside him. He stood and followed Spock a short distance away.

"Where's Terizol?" McCoy whispered, quickly assessing Spock for injuries. "Are you all right? Did you find Timberlake?"

The Vulcan's attention was already focused on the weight pinning Kirk to the ground. Before, on their first mission so many years ago, McCoy might have misinterpreted Spock's expressions as dispassionate interest. Now, he could sense the emotion churning under the surface, Spock was anything but detached as his gaze studied the critical nature of Kirk's predicament. He answered curtly, "Timberlake is dead, buried under rock. Terizol is inside the main cave." Gesturing toward the rubble strewn entryway, Spock ordered, "Check on him. I believe his condition is grave." Spock took a step toward the Captain.

"Wait! What about the space station? Have you tried contacting it yet?" McCoy pointed toward the communicator on Spock's belt.

"Yes, Doctor, I have." The bleak look in the dark eyes was enough to send McCoy's

stomach plummeting. Rescue was not currently an option.

McCoy forced himself to follow Spock's order and examine Terizol. The little Andorian lay curled in a huddled ball on his side, moaning in a sing-song voice. The bright, curious eyes were dull and glazed as they slowly looked at the Doctor. A pressure dressing had been applied to his abdomen but there was a turquoise fluid seeping around it, already gathering in a puddle on the floor beneath him.

Anxious to get back to Kirk, McCoy's motions were efficient and smooth as he attempted to stop the bleeding. It was not long before he sat back on his heels, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

A fragile, too pale blue hand touched his leg. "Honored Spock . . . chooses his assistants well . . . the pain has eased . . . thank you."

McCoy leaned closer to the drooping antennae. "It's not enough. You need surgery soon."

The eyes drifted closed, his face calm. "I know . . . my time is near. The ancestors reach for me . . ." Terizol's hand touching McCoy's leg fell limply to the ground.

The Doctor remained still, relieved when the Andorian continued to breathe. Torn between his two patients, McCoy rejoined his two friends.

Spock was squatting at Kirk's side engaged in a low-toned discussion. McCoy took the opportunity to run another scan on Kirk. He was relieved to find his vital signs stable, the blood pressure low but not critical, respirations and pulse slightly increased but again not critical. There seemed to be no reading of pain and he rechecked the scanner again.

His movement attracted Kirk's attention. "How's Terizol?"

McCoy pulled his attention away from his scanner. "Not good. Any chance of contacting someone for help?"

Kirk exchanged a cryptic glance with Spock before answering. McCoy knew that look, knew he was not going to like the answers Spock was supplying. "What?" he snapped.

"Spock believes that the Preserver's device may have functioned in much the same manner as the one on Miramanee's planet. It was to protect the planet from asteroids . . . and attackers."

"So?"

Spock angled his head slightly toward the Doctor. "The mechanism may have misinterpreted any devices orbiting this planet as hostile. I believe the space station was very likely destroyed and possibly any other orbiting devices."

"What other devices? I thought Brett Colony chose to remain on a primitive level."

Kirk answered, "They have weather control and communication satellites. If those have been destroyed, it will certainly cause havoc in their society. Spock has already attempted to recalibrate the communicator to attempt to contact someone on the mainland but so far there is no reply."

"What about the Enterprise?"

"She's out of range for another two and half days. I think we have to accept that we're on our own here." Kirk shared a look with the Vulcan before meeting McCoy's eyes.

McCoy paced a couple of steps toward the cave opening, running a hand through his hair again. He turned back, his anger spilling out at the only target available. "Dammit, Spock, there's got to be another answer. We can't just be stuck out here--isn't there someone near enough to walk to? You're always so ready to give up before we try! We've got to--"

"Bones, stop." The quiet order stopped his tirade, but not his frustration at the situation.

"Jim, don't you understand? Terizol's dying and there's nothing I can do . . . and--" He could not keep from glancing at the pillar lying across Kirk.

"I know, it doesn't look good for me either." Kirk's calmness sent a chill down McCoy's spine. Surely Kirk had not accepted that he would die on this godforsaken piece of rock.

"Bones, it's over two thousand miles to any border and there's an ocean separating us from Brett Colony. No one lives here. Unless we're able to contact someone then yes, we're stuck here."

Wanting to curse him for his seeming placid acceptance, McCoy clenched his jaw against arguing further. The hazel eyes held his, the depths already distant as if Kirk were already withdrawing from them. It was that look that forced McCoy into motion. He knelt on the opposite side of Kirk, squeezing his shoulder firmly, "You're not going to die here, Jim Kirk. I'm not going to let you."

Kirk smiled faintly, closing his eyes with a small, unconvinced nod of his head. "Whatever you say, Bones."

Spock was rising to his feet, his gaze disapproving. "Doctor, if you are quite finished with your histrionics, I would like to attempt to lift the rock enough for you to pull the Captain free."

McCoy stared first at him then at the pillar. No human could lift it. Nor Vulcan, he amended. And once Kirk was free, he might die in the first few minutes if McCoy did not work quickly enough. Before he could open his mouth, Kirk pulled his attention back by grasping his hand.

"Bones, we talked about it. I know what you're going to say. Moving it could kill me. But it might not and I want to try. Please, let Spock try."

It was hard to not respond Kirk's plea reinforced by his touch. McCoy swallowed hard before nodding. "All right. But let me get ready first."

While Spock cleared the ground of rubble behind them, McCoy laid out his instruments for ready access. Once he had Kirk clear, he would have to repair the artery before his friend quite simply bled to death. As Spock moved to the end of the pillar, McCoy injected Kirk with a pain reliever..

McCoy squatted down behind the Captain and lifted Kirk up slightly, locking his hands across the broad chest. "Ready Spock."

For a long time, nothing happened. The pillar did not move. They could see the muscles bulging on Spock's arms and neck, his face a study in intense concentration. McCoy was not sure just how long he tried, but his own leg muscles were cramping when Kirk called to the Vulcan.

"Spock, stop. It's not going to work."

The upraised brows drawing down into a frown was the only indication he heard. Spock continued to push against the pillar for another thirty seconds before straightening. Dropping his arms, Spock leaned his head briefly against the rock in a seeming gesture of defeat.

"Spock," Kirk whispered.

The Vulcan glanced over at the two men. "I wish to try again. A moment please."

"Spock, no. You can't," Kirk pleaded. As Spock ignored him, his hands steepling in what they both recognized as a meditation pose, the Captain looked up at McCoy still seated behind him. "Bones, make him stop before something happens."

McCoy nodded, pulling his hands free, hoping that Kirk did not sense just how disappointed he was that they had not managed to free him. Even though he had argued against

the action, his heart agreed with Kirk, he did not want to see him pinned any longer with that monstrosity over him.

"Doctor." Spock was back in position, his legs slightly bent, arms under the end of the pillar.

"Spock, don't. Bones, make him stop," Kirk pleaded again.

McCoy hesitated, but the look in the Vulcan's eyes gave him the answer. They would try again. Ignoring Kirk's request, he slipped his hands back under the Captain's arms. "Let him try one more time, Jim."

With super-Vulcan effort, Spock lifted the stone, McCoy's eyes widening as he saw the pillar move. Centimeter by centimeter, he raised it enough for the Doctor to pull Kirk free.

As soon as he was safe, McCoy frantically worked on the injuries. Even though he repaired the severed artery within the first minute, the Doctor estimated he lost at least a liter of blood on top of what had seeped out before. Amazingly, on the outside there was not much damage, just a deep, jagged cut to the upper right thigh. As expected, both legs were dark blue from the lack of circulation although the left one was already beginning to show signs of increased circulation. He repaired what he could with the laser on the right, but the crushing nature of the injury had caused too much damage for the limited use of the field laser. The damaged network needed for proper circulation responded a little to his ministrations and he was finally able to auscultate a faint pulse in the left foot.

He stopped to check Kirk's vital signs. Blood pressure had dropped another ten points. Respirations rapid, close to hyperventilation. McCoy reached out for the cold hand curled into a tight fist, "Are you hurting?"

Kirk's face was revealing in the total lack of expression. "I'm okay." The eyes narrowed, "What about Spock?"

"Spock?" McCoy's head snapped around, finding Spock slumped beside the pillar. Damn. The Doctor squeezed Kirk's hand. "I think he's all right." Rechecking his scanner, McCoy injected two hypos into the Captain's shoulder, one for shock and a boost for the pain. Keeping the scanner close at hand, he went to Spock's side.

The Vulcan was unconscious. He clicked on the scanner. Lactic acid. A dangerously high level of lactic acid. McCoy bit his lip, wondering what kind of Vulcan magic Spock had pulled out of his hat and just how he was supposed to correct it. He mentally ran through his medical supplies, cursing the limited availability. It was possible a dose of tri-ox could stimulate the system enough to produce oxygen at the cellular level and counteract the lactic acid. Drawing a breath, he pressed the hypo against Spock's arm.

Five seconds later, the eyelids fluttered once. Then Spock was shoving up on one shaky arm. "Jim?"

"Hanging in there, worrying about you." McCoy could not keep the irritation from his voice.

Spock tried to stand, but his legs would not hold him. In the few steps it took to return to Kirk with McCoy assisting him, the Vulcan was rapidly regaining his strength. And his tongue. "Doctor, I distinctly remember having this conversation twenty-two times in the past. Tri-ox compounds are not compatible with my system. I would appreciate it if you remember this in the future."

"A sour stomach is a small price to pay for saving your life, Spock."

"I do not believe that I was in danger of dying this time or seventeen of the previous times."

"You have got to be the most ungrateful patient--" McCoy broke off as Spock pulled free from his supporting arm to sit on the ground at Kirk's side. The Doctor glanced back at Kirk to find his color improved and his mouth pulling to one side in an exasperated expression at their ongoing argument.

"Won't you two ever learn to get along?" Kirk gave a mock glare at both men.

Spock drew a deep breath. "When the Doctor accepts the fact that my system is essentially Vulcan and can only tolerate medications specifically designated for my species."

McCoy shook his head. "Sorry I wasted any of it on you. Should've just hit you on the head." Another discreet glance at Kirk reassured him he was feeling better. He made a show of stomping off, "I'm going to check on Terizol. He's exhibited much more appreciation than the two of you."

"Hey, I appreciate you, Bones." Kirk called after him.

The Andorian was still sleeping but the vital signs were slipping and his pain indicators were rising. In the dim lighting, McCoy quietly opened his medikit to re-examine the contents. What he needed the most, antibiotics and pain relievers, were rapidly dwindling to a dangerously low stock. Terizol was dying and there was nothing he could do to stop it, but he should be able to keep him comfortable. Should. Four hypos for pain. He wondered how ethical it was to pray for Terizol's death before he had to intervene with another dose of pain medicine, therefore reducing the amount he was able to save for Kirk. Appalled at his own callousness, McCoy closed the medikit and instead prayed that he would not have to face that decision. And to make the right one, if it came.

Kirk and Spock were arguing when he rejoined them. The Captain was frowning at the Vulcan, "Weren't the steps damaged in the tremors?"

McCoy found a matching frown as his eyes drifted to the ledge. The only stairs he knew of were the ones that led up to this cavern and down to the canyon floor far below them.

Spock gave an uncharacteristic vague reply, "Some."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea. Where's McCoy? What does he think?"

"Right here, Jim." McCoy stepped into his view beside Spock. "What's not such a good idea?"

"Spock wants to climb down to our campsite and get some supplies."

McCoy shuddered at his words, his eyes returning to the ledge and the long drop to the surface below. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea either." Forcing himself to approach the edge, the Doctor leaned over enough to view the path they had taken to climb up here. "Spock, even from here, I can see that the path has been compromised. There's a lot of rocks and debris blocking the way. Maybe we could consider it tomorrow when you have a full day to try."

McCoy turned, watching Spock's anxious gaze fall on Kirk and then at the sky beyond. "We may need the supplies tonight. I believe I should attempt this today."

Rejoining them, McCoy let his hand skim Spock's shoulders, not surprised to find the muscles were tense. "Why is it so urgent you go today?" He followed Spock's gaze but only saw a brilliant blue sky.. "What is you see out there?"

"Clouds."

"Clouds? Where? I don't see anything." McCoy leaned forward, unable to see anything

on the horizon.

Kirk's frown had deepened. "So I guess that proves your theory regarding the mechanism destroying any orbiting devices. I think I remember that no rain is planned here for the next month, is it?"

Spock confirmed his question with a nod. McCoy shaded his eyes, still attempting to see the clouds. "I think you're making this up. Besides, we're fairly well protected here, what's a little rain going to do?"

It was Kirk who answered. "We built our campsite near a gully. Even a little rain will probably cause it to flood and wash away all of our supplies. If we want something from there, now is the time to get it."

Spock tilted his head, a familiar expression crossing his face as he looked at Kirk. A look that McCoy had frankly not seen on the Vulcan's face in a very long time. He had told Kirk privately that it was Spock's 'impressive for a human' expression'. Unsure of what Spock was responding to, McCoy was pleased to note that Kirk's face had relaxed into a soft smile.

Then his gaze returned to the ledge and he was unable to stop his objections, "I still don't like it." He sat down beside Spock. "If something happens to you, there's no way to help you down there."

"I'm going to put that on your tombstone, Bones. 'Here lies, I don't like it, McCoy'." Kirk grinned at the exasperated look McCoy threw in his direction.

"You don't want to know what I'm going to put on yours," the Doctor shot back.

"That's why I willed my ashes to Spock. I don't trust you with them."

Spock shifted his attention between Kirk and McCoy, both eyebrows raised in concern. "Gentlemen, I do not believe this discussion is beneficial or appropriate."

Sighing, McCoy reached down to grasp Kirk's hand. "Sometimes, you got to laugh, Spock." He focused on Kirk. "How are you doing?"

"Fine." Kirk sounded slightly testy with the question. He never liked being coddled or protected. "Look, the only supplies we have up here are limited. Enough water for the day if we find the backpack. No protection for the rather nippy nights. No way to build a fire. Food. We left all of that below. Due to the strict regulations covering visitations here on this site, I don't think that Terizol or Timberlake kept more than a few hour's worth of supplies here. Am I right, Spock?"

"Terizol confirmed that earlier. Sir Timberlake was very strict regarding leaving any personal items inside. They carried a canteen of liquid with them and returned to the space station to eat. I assumed incorrectly that they had a supply stored with emergency rations and items such as rope for climbing but Terizol indicated there were no provisions kept here."

McCoy glared first at Kirk and then at Spock. "All right, dammit go. I still don't like--" Catching himself, he turned another glare back at Kirk before addressing Spock. "At least help us find the other communicator so we'll know how you're doing."

With Kirk calling into Spock's communicator, it did not take long to find the hidden one under several loose rocks. As the Vulcan turned to leave, the Captain brushed his arm. "Spock, be careful. Remember the gravity of the situation."

The reminder of their experience on El Capitan a few weeks ago earned Kirk a lifted eyebrow. "On the contrary, Captain, gravity is foremost on my mind."

Kirk grinned at the rejoinder. Then he said in a low tone, "I can't help but wish you had

those anti-gravity boots now, Spock."

The Vulcan's eyes softened and he laid a hand atop Kirk's touching his arm. "I will be careful, Jim."

McCoy walked him to the edge, waiting until Spock disappeared from his view. Unable to see him, Kirk called anxiously into the silence, "Bones?"

The Doctor grunted, coming back to his side. "Sorry, I was just trying to see those damned clouds that he thinks are out there. He's past the first turn in the path. I guess all we can do now is cross our fingers."

Kirk nodded. "How's Terizol doing?"

McCoy shrugged in reply, attempting to keep his frustration from showing. "I wanted to move him here so I can keep an eye on both of you. He wants to stay inside. Something to do with the spirits of his ancestors. He keeps singing."

"Hmmm, shall I sing for you too?"

McCoy rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "You don't want Terizol to think he's going to their version of hell do you?"

"Have I ever told you your bedside manner is atrocious?"

"Frequently," McCoy answered without rancor.

Earlier the Doctor thought he had spied a piece of material when returning from the ledge. Hoping that it was the backpack, he began searching through the rubble near them and was finally rewarded with discovering the missing item. McCoy was relieved to discover the meager contents undamaged. Kneeling by Kirk's side, the Doctor held up a packet of water. "Thirsty?"

"Not really." Kirk moved his head restlessly, wincing with the motion.

McCoy slid a hand underneath his shoulders, ignoring his answer. "Jim, you've lost fluids, this'll help replace them."

The Doctor held him up securely enough to drink from the packet without difficulty.

Kirk drank about a third before pushing it away. "Bones?"

Kirk's eyes were on his legs. The strong face had paled more, giving him the appearance of a frightened boy briefly. The expression was gone almost immediately. "My legs." He gestured toward the lower half of his body. "If we--I make it out of this mess, how bad are they?"

McCoy eased him back down, scooting the soft material of the backpack under his head as a cushion. Grasping a tightly curled hand in his own, he replied honestly, "The right one has very little damage, a simple fracture." McCoy paused, his blue eyes glancing briefly down at the injured leg. "It's hard to say with the left one. There's a lot of damage but it may be possible to repair it so you can go climb your damned mountains again."

He received a ghost of a smile. "Can I help it if your hobbies include sitting on porch swings, listening to June bugs and mine is climbing mountains?"

His thoughts split between worrying about Spock navigating the treacherous climb and the incident at El Capitan a few weeks before, McCoy snapped, "Your hobbies include anything that's without any regard for life. Any sane person doesn't climb mountains without the proper protective gear."

Kirk looked guardedly at McCoy, his eyes narrowing briefly. His answer was forced. "Over the course of my career, you have declared me crazy more times than I can count. Guess I'm trying to live up to your expectations."

Remembering Kirk's dizzying fall which he had witnessed at El Capitan and the fact that

this had not been the first of his nearly suicidal stunts, McCoy replied, "My expectations don't include you dying in such a wasteful manner. I'd like for you to answer me honestly just once, what is this continuing flirtation with death about?"

Kirk lifted his head, pulling his hand free of McCoy's. "Bones, lay off. I'm not trying to kill myself if that's what you're driving at."

His frustration fled as Kirk dropped his head, the cheeks paling alarmingly. "Jim?" McCoy already has his scanner whirling. Pain level was spiking. The Captain's lips pressed tightly together, tense and irregular breathing were the only visible signs of his struggle against the pain.

The Doctor rested a hand back on the top of his head, massaging lightly in circles and he kept his voice soft and soothing as he guided Kirk through a relaxation exercise. Several minutes later, color was returning to his face and the respirations were more even and deep. The eyes remained closed, fluttering open once when McCoy lifted his hand.

Kirk whispered, "No, don't stop. Helps."

Lifting a Spockian eyebrow at the comment, the Doctor replaced his hand and continued the soothing motions. After a while, his patient resting and quiet, McCoy straightened. But the moment he pulled his hand away, a ripple of distress crossed Kirk's features and he moaned, tossing his head back and forth. Silently, the Doctor settled back down beside the Captain and placed his hand lightly on top of the brown, curly hair. Almost immediately, the Captain lay still, the tension disappearing from his face.

Perplexed, McCoy continued lightly massaging Kirk's scalp. Even though the Captain appeared to be asleep, he seemed to sense almost immediately when McCoy was leaving. He shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position, preparing to continue his actions until Kirk was fully asleep. Then he could check on Terizol.

Laughing, Sybok's booming laughter echoed, joining the fires that burned unendingly around him. He could see Spock was being consumed by the agonizing tongues of flame. Sybok stood beside his brother, untouched by the fire, beckoning to Kirk. He pushed his way toward them, trying to reach them. Spock held out his hand. Something was between them. A wall of glass. Spock's face erupted in the radiation blisters, his eyes became unfocused and blind. Kirk screamed against the pain and the laughter erupted again changing from Sybok to Khan's face. His friend's body collapsed and was still. Then the figure changed. His ship. The Enterprise was lost, burning, a comet in the fading Genesis sky. His eyes followed it to the planet and discovered that Spock and McCoy were back on the platforms on Vulcan with lightening flashing around them. Something was wrong, he could not reach them. He pushed past the Vulcan guards and was stopped cold by the wall of glass. Spock was taking McCoy's hand and retreating into the misty gray morning, leaving him behind.

A flash of lightening pulled Kirk out of the nightmare abruptly. He opened his eyes to total darkness. Heart pounding, he tried to push up on his elbows but something was holding him down. Suddenly muted pain became spikes of agony and he reached for his leg, a low moan escaping. Gentle pressure on his hand forced him back down.

"Jim, you're safe." Spock said quietly. "You were dreaming."

Still caught in the nightmare, Kirk twisted his palm to grasp Spock's hand. "I couldn't reach you--" He stopped. "You're back."

Lightening lit up the cavern again, eerily highlighting Spock's face. "Obviously." The predictable reply somehow made everything feel more normal and safe.

"Are you all right?"

"I am fine. However, I have a strong desire to leave any mountain climbing up to you in the future. How are you feeling?" Spock's outline was barely visible.

Kirk shook his head slightly in reply. A noise from inside the main cave diverted his attention. "Where's McCoy?"

"In the cavern."

Kirk turned his head toward the cave entrance. "With Terizol?"

A burst of lightening showed Spock's pinched, concerned face. "No. Terizol did not make it. He died over an hour ago."

"Oh." Mourning the loss would have to wait. Another clap of lightening and thunder lit up the area and Kirk caught a glimpse of Spock's hair blowing wildly. Suddenly aware of the cool night air, he shivered, turning to look out at the stormy night sky. "I guess you were right. It's going to rain."

"More than rain. I have witnessed destruction of the land from the violence of the storm." Spock hesitated, "I do not believe it will be safe for you to remain in this open area. We will need to move you further inside cave soon."

Knowing the dark eyes would be watching him closely, Kirk forced himself to nod without reacting. No need to make his friend feel worse by admitting to the fear of the pain the move would cause. Something must have slipped through though.

Spock dropped down beside him resting a hand on his arm. "McCoy will give you medicine before we move you. And I will assist with a light meld if needed."

Kirk shook his head, remembering the healer's instructions to McCoy. Spock was to avoid mental contact unless it was with a Vulcan healer. "I'll manage Spock. No melds."

"As you wish." Spock nodded but even in the darkness, Kirk thought he saw the eyes darken with emotion.

Disappearing into the darkness, Spock returned within a few minutes with McCoy in tow. However, even with the medication, a strangled scream escaped at the white-hot sheet of pain caused by Spock's gentle attempt to lift him.

"I can't. Bones, don't," Kirk gasped, unable to keep from pleading. "Don't make me."

He could hear a whispered discussion between the two but the unrelenting pain was taking most of his concentration. A warmer than human hand rested supportively on his shoulder and before he knew what was happening, darkness descended rapidly.

Kirk was already moaning before they had him settled. As soon as he was on the bed they had made out of their sleeping bags, McCoy had his scanner whirling. "We can't chance another nerve pinch, it might send him into shock." He shook his head, gesturing with his scanner toward the injuries. "I need to align the legs better before he wakes up."

Peripherally, McCoy saw Spock grasp Kirk's hand as he concentrated on the readings of the scanner and the position of the bones. Aligning them as much as was possible could prevent complications later and decrease the pain Kirk would experience. He repositioned the light splint he had placed on the right leg slightly, eliciting another low moan from Kirk.

Spock cleared his throat. "Would it not be prudent to give another pain injection?"

McCoy did not answer until he was certain the right leg was supported in the correct position. Then he looked up, meeting the dark eyes. "Between Terizol and Jim, I have one dose of pain medicine left." He scanned the mangled left leg and then glanced at the Vulcan. "Hold him, I'll do this as quickly as possible."

The necessary manipulation of the limb brought Kirk to full awareness, a scream echoing around the chamber. Forcing himself to ignore the pain he was causing, McCoy focused on the leg, propping it up slightly to assist with circulation. Finally, he allowed himself to look up, his eyes widening with surprise as he discovered that Spock had fallen to the ground at Kirk's side. Now he had two patients to worry about.

Kirk's eyes were tightly closed, his face shocky-white. McCoy moved swiftly to his side, stopping long enough to reassure himself that Spock was not in any immediate danger. He grasped Kirk's hand. The fingers curled tightly around his. "Bones?"

"Right here, Jim. I want you to try to rest."

"Spock." The Captain blinked, trying to look sideways but moaned with the motion. "Something's wrong."

"Spock's fine. Rest, Jim." Placing his other hand on Kirk's forehead, he stroked lightly across his temple and down the side of his face. Repeating this motion and using a soothing tone, McCoy concentrated, attempting a mild form of hypnosis to encourage Kirk to sleep. His efforts were rewarded within minutes by deep, even breathing. There was no reaction when he removed his hand from Kirk's grasp.

Glancing over at Spock, he found the Vulcan was sitting, watching him. Checking Kirk again, McCoy trudged over to sit beside Spock. "You want to tell me what happened?"

Spock explained quietly, "I was attempting to assist Jim by altering his neural synapse response. The method does not require a mind meld. I believe I experienced a direct backlash of Jim's pain. I was not prepared for it."

McCoy narrowed his eyes at Spock. The Vulcan could not conceal the truth in a garble of scientific or cultural mumbo jumbo. "So, explain the headache you have if you were not in mental contact with Jim?"

An eyebrow arched sharply. "I do not believe I mentioned a headache."

McCoy frowned, knowing that Spock was experiencing one but not willing to explain either to himself or Spock how he knew. The awareness had come when he touched Spock earlier to ensure he was all right. "Well, it ought to prove to you the folly of attempting a mind meld to help Jim."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Spock's face. "I do not follow your logic. What occurred had nothing to do with a mind meld. It does not rule out an attempt if one proves necessary."

"Oh, I can see it now. Me stuck here in this cave for who knows how many hours with a raving mad Vulcan after such an attempt and Jim, who'll be so worried about you that he'll drag himself to your side, broken leg or not, if he thinks you're hurt. Be my guest." McCoy's sarcasm turned more harsh than he intended. "Ignore my advice which, by the way, comes straight from your Vulcan gurus who said to avoid any mental contact for the next few months. I'll be the first to tell you I told you so."

Spock raised an eyebrow in response. "Doctor, you have an annoying tendency of being overly dramatic." He glanced over at the quiet form nearby. "Interesting that it is acceptable for you to use a form of mind touch with the Captain yet you deny me the opportunity."

"What?" McCoy's reaction was instantaneous and loud. He lowered his voice, surprised to find it was shaking. "What the hell do you mean?"

Nodding toward Kirk, Spock said, "You assisted Jim to sleep by utilizing a mind technique."

"I used hypnosis, if that's what you mean," McCoy growled.

"Agreed," Spock paused, "However, through the touch you reinforced the suggestive nature of your words. Otherwise, due to the pain he is experiencing, Jim would not have responded to a simple technique of hypnosis."

Somewhere in a far corner of his mind was an acknowledgement of Spock's statement, but panic made McCoy scramble to deny the suggestion that he was capable of mental contact. "I have used the techniques of hypnosis since before you were . . . at the Academy. I've used it many times, some of those in situations when there was no other opportunity for treatment of symptoms. Jim's response is due to a simple technique, Spock, nothing more."

Spock glanced at Kirk then rose. He studied McCoy. "I would recommend that you take this opportunity to rest."

Subject changed. Case closed. McCoy started to argue but snapped his mouth shut when he realized he did not want to continue the debate any longer either. And he was tired.

"Sound advice. I'll take the next watch." He stretched out, using his backpack for a pillow. Surprisingly, it took little effort to drift asleep.

A different nightmare, the same results. Kirk fell out of the nightmare abruptly, his heart pounding, sweat beading on his face. The brief surge of adrenaline brought sudden awareness of throbbing pain from his legs. He sucked in air, concentrating on his breathing until the bright edge of agony eased.

He glanced around, discovering Spock sitting close by, legs folded yoga fashion. Idly, he continued his survey seeing the outline of McCoy sleeping on the hard ground. He was still sweating, it seemed terribly hot inside the cave.

There was enough light to see the dim outlines of some of the ruins surrounding them. He frowned at the devastation the tremors had wrought. "Everything is ruined."

Spock turned sharply, "Jim. How are you feeling?"

Kirk grimaced in annoyance. Spock of all people should understand no purpose was served in discussing his injury. He ignored the question. "Is there going to be much to salvage here? This site--the planning, the labor by the native people . . ." Kirk rubbed his face then shoved at the blanket covering him. "Despite everything we've seen, the construction of these cliff dwellings is --" He broke off, irritated when Spock pulled the blanket up to cover his shoulders. "I'm hot."

Spock placed his hand on Kirk's forehead, a frown crossing his face. He peeled the blanket back. "I believe your fever is rising." He turned towards the Doctor as if to awaken him.

"Let him sleep, Spock. I'm okay," Kirk snapped.

The Vulcan was reaching for a piece of pottery nearby. Pulling a wet cloth from it, he began wiping Kirk's face and arms with the cool cloth.

"Mmmm, that feels better." As Spock dipped the cloth back into the water, Kirk stared at the bowl he was using. "Spock, isn't that an artifact? Should you be using it? They're invaluable. There's already been so much damage."

Ignoring him, the Vulcan continued with his task. "You are no less valuable than these artifacts."

Arguing with Spock was frequently an exercise in futility. The Vulcan used the cloth several more times but set it aside when Kirk shivered. "Cold." He shifted restlessly, but tensed when it caused a flame of fire to sear his left side. He drew in a sharp breath, setting his face to keep from revealing his discomfort.

Drawing the sleeping bag back up around Kirk's shoulders, Spock tucked it firmly in place. Kirk relaxed with the warmth, finally drawing a deep breath. He opened his eyes, giving Spock a perplexed look and then sniffed the air noisily. When Spock did not comment, he tried again. "What'd you do? The sleeping bag stinks horribly."

"Apparently one of the few animals that manage to survive on the desert also have an instinctive protection against predators. It was frightened by me and --"

"Let loose on our gear. Like a skunk on Earth." Kirk laughed lightly. Then he smelled the air again. "This is pretty disgusting."

"As Doctor McCoy is so fond of commenting, one should not look a gift Vulcan in the mouth." Spock glanced at the Doctor. "I have never discussed that particular saying with him. I am not certain of its meaning."

Kirk took one last sniff. "It means Spock, I shouldn't complain about the smell and appreciate the warmth."

An eyebrow arched, "I do not see the correlation."

"Dammit, do I have to explain everything to you, Spock?" McCoy's gruff voice complained. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "My great-grandpappy always said before you bought a piece of horseflesh you should check his health by looking at his teeth. But if you receive a horse as a gift then it would be ungracious to check his teeth."

"Ah, then you are comparing me to a horse?"

McCoy groaned. He stood, stretching his arms. "Sometimes Spock, you annoy me."

Kirk grinned at the still raised eyebrow. He asked softly, "What time is it?"

"Four hundred hours." Before Kirk could ask, Spock added, "Approximately forty-six hours until the Enterprise is due."

The Captain watched McCoy still stretching the kinks out of his back. He limped over to Kirk, turning on a mini-light which Spock must have retrieved yesterday. As he studied Kirk's legs, McCoy was already grumbling. "I keep telling you I'm too old for these camping trips. Im planning the next shore leave and I guarantee you there won't be any sleeping on the ground and where ever we go there will be chairs. These old bones . . . " He ran down, still assessing the condition of the leg. He turned off the light and his scanner, reaching out to take Kirk's pulse. "How are you feeling?"

Annoyed at the question, Kirk snapped, "How do you think I feel, Bones? Like someone with a broken leg. I'm cold, uncomfortable and hurting. What difference will knowing that make?"

"Grumpy, too." McCoy squeezed his hand gently before letting go. He rested his hand on Kirk's forehead. "Chilling?"

Kirk shrugged, wishing he would get the medical third degree over with, knowing it was not going to change the outcome. The more he was forced to think about his condition, the more aware he was of the pain that continued relentlessly from his legs.

McCoy had left his hand on his forehead, smoothing the Captain's hair back, running his hand soothingly over his head. Instead of irritating him more, Kirk was surprised as some of his tension eased with McCoy's touch. The Doctor repeated the gesture while speaking quietly to Spock. "Hand me a water packet, Spock."

His mouth and tongue had begun to feel increasingly dry and gritty. Kirk drank the packet greedily. "Thanks, Bones."

"Anytime." McCoy rested his hand for a moment longer on the Captain's head before removing it. Kirk felt oddly bereft, wanting to tell the Doctor to continue. The words stuck in his throat. Even after all this time together, he found it hard to admit to need.

McCoy settled down on one side of him with Spock on the other. Kirk sent a speculative look at Spock before asking McCoy, "Bones, I've been wanting to ask you, but didn't quite know how . . ."

The Doctor leaned back, his hands in his laps. "What?"

"Yesterday morning, Spock said he sensed you were troubled." Kirk lifted a hand to touch McCoy's arm. "What's wrong?"

The Doctor sent an irritated look at Spock. "You're getting to be a bit of a busybody, don't you think?"

Spock met the Doctor's eyes evenly but did not reply. The response seemed to anger McCoy, and he straightened, his blue eyes blazing angrily even in the dim lighting. "Doesn't take much to figure out what's wrong with me. Your continuing flirtation with death. It's not me that's troubled, it's you. But you're too stubborn to talk about it! Spock told me about you defying the Klingons back on that planet. Were you daring them to kill you too?"

Kirk kept his tone mild. "I thought perhaps my injury might keep you from going for my jugular which seems to be your forte lately."

"You asked for it!" McCoy blasted. He drew a calming breath. "You want me to list the fool-hardy stunts you've pulled in the last month? Windgliding for one without the appropriate protection is the height of stupidity! You're damned lucky you weren't killed when you fell. And don't get me started on El Capitan."

Kirk ignored the anger. From the very beginning of their long relationship, McCoy's honesty was one of the attributes that Kirk appreciated the most. But how could he explain to them what he couldn't explain to himself? "How did you find out about the windgliding? I thought you went to that lecture series?"

McCoy sent a brief glance at Spock. Kirk narrowed his eyes at the Vulcan. "Spock? What do you know of this?"

The Vulcan took a deep breath. "I hesitate to speak of this, for both of you seem reluctant to acknowledge the link that now binds the three of us together. I felt your thoughts reaching for me."

"You mean when I fell?" Kirk tensed. The instant result was sharp pain, white hot in its intensity. He drew a slow breath to relax, willing away the inner trembling it left behind.

"Then and before. You called to me before your attempt to windglide."

"My thoughts?" Kirk stared at the Vulcan. "Explain."

Spock folded his hands. "Not thoughts specifically, more like a sensation that you were in distress." The Vulcan paused as if he were carefully choosing his words. "In the past, this has only occurred when you were in danger. I believe there have been occasions also where you were

aware of the same sensation when I was in danger."

Kirk remembered a mission that had gone sour. A mission where everyone was convinced Spock was dead. Except for him. "Yes, you know I have." He paused, finally admitting quietly, "Up until you died. Since then, I have not."

The Doctor checked Kirk before glancing at Spock. "But you felt a sensation of distress from Jim, nothing else?"

"Pain, deep pain of the soul. And fear," Spock whispered.

A shiver of that same fear made him bite his lip against the pain it caused. The confused tangle of anger and grief left from the deaths of his son and the Enterprise coming almost before he could accept that Spock and McCoy were safe was buried deep. And he intended to leave it there until he was ready to face his losses. Searing anger flooded him. "What gives you the right to analyze me?"

McCoy laid a hand on his arm. "Jim, he's your friend. Who else could you trust?"

Panic made him wound where he had no desire to hurt. "I seem to remember you begging me to trust Sybok not very long ago!"

McCoy withdrew his hand and shrank back into the shadows but not before Kirk witnessed the hurt in his eyes. Subduing his own fear did not allow him the luxury of apologizing to his friend.

Spock's voice drew both of them back. "It is because of Sybok that I have attempted to examine our relationship closely. The Doctor chooses not to admit to the resonance that we share due to the Fal Tor Pan. And I have noted a distinct reluctance on the Captain's part to acknowledge that a resonance does exist between the Doctor and me."

For the first time, a hint of amusement crept into McCoy's tone. "Jealous, Jim?"

Kirk was still backpeddling, desperate to change the subject. Anything to keep from talking about himself, to keep from remembering. "Bones, after all these years of knowing Spock, what's so bad about sharing a link with him?"

McCoy rose suddenly, pacing across the room. "It's the middle of the night and we are stranded and you're seriously injured. I really don't know why we're discussing this anyway."

Kirk felt suddenly warm. Pushing the odorous blanket back, he shifted restlessly. His reward was pain that seemed to knife him from his leg to the back of his neck. He bit off a moan, closing his eyes tightly against the waves of agony. A hand grasped his, and Kirk held on tightly as he rode it out. A cool hand rested on his forehead.

"Doctor, I believe his fever is returning."

The pain was easing. He looked up to discover two sets of concerned eyes watching him. McCoy put his hand on his forehead, then moved it to feel the back of his neck. "Jim?"

"S'okay. Don't worry," Kirk managed, edges of pain still blurring his vision.

"You have a slight fever. We need you to drink some more fluids." McCoy was holding another silver packet.

Kirk nodded, drinking down nearly half before stopping. He shook his head when the Doctor offered it to him again. "Enough."

He gripped Spock's hand harder as the pain swelled in intensity. Hot tears flooded his eyes. McCoy's hand on his head began the soothing, gentle massage that allowed Kirk to relax and float with the sensation.

Drifting, Kirk opened his eyes slowly. He was not sure how much time had passed. Spock was close by but it was McCoy who rested his hand on the top of his head.

"Better?" McCoy asked.

Kirk lifted a hand to take McCoy's in his, squeezing it lightly. "Much, thanks."

McCoy nodded, sending a sharp glance at Spock. Wondering what the look meant, Kirk sought out Spock. The Vulcan seemed as perplexed as Kirk. Without meaning to, he asked, "It seems lighter in here. What time is it?"

"Seven hundred hours."

"Jim, I want you to drink the rest of this water. You still have a fever." Another silver packet was held in front of him.

Kirk took a small sip, grimacing when he swallowed. His throat was so dry the liquid hurt going down. He managed to take a few drinks before handing it back with a shaking hand.

"Later."

As a chill shook him, the blanket was wrapped warmly around him. Between the chills and the pain, he barely noticed the odor. "I think I'm getting used to the smell. It doesn't seem so bad."

"Good, since there's not much we can do about it." McCoy gave him a small grin. "Besides, be glad it smells, otherwise, I might be fighting you for it's use." The Doctor pressed a hypo against his arm. "Jim, this is for the fever and will help some with the pain. Your job is to let it work and rest."

He could hear the two men talking in soft whispers nearby, allowing him to drift off in safe comfort. The dreams that came were nightmarish in quality, his rest frequently disturbed when he inadvertently moved his leg.

Shafts of daylight were lighting the chamber. He still felt hot, shoving at the cover on top of him. "Mm . . . hot," he mumbled.

The blanket was lifted off him. McCoy sat nearby, dipping a cloth into the pottery bowl. His mouth felt dry, his tongue rubbery making words difficult to form. "Thirsty."

So much effort to swallow. After the third time, he tried to push the packet away. "Tired."

"I know. Just hang in there, Jim-boy." The tightness in McCoy's voice pulled him back from the edge of sleep.

Unaware Kirk was watching him, McCoy was staring down at the injured legs, frustration and anger showing on his face. Kirk asked quietly, "Bad?"

It took the Doctor a full minute to respond. When he turned to face Kirk, he had his professional face in place. "It's not much longer. You're doing good."

"It's all right . . . heard earlier . . . no more medicine." McCoy's face tightened at his words. "Not your fault, Doctor." He tried to lighten the mood. "Scotty will be here . . . maybe early."

"Yeah, maybe," McCoy replied morosely.

Kirk tried to turn his head but stopped when the room swam around him. "Where's Spock?"

"Checking the damn walls outside. Thinks he's an Alturian Bat and can climb sideways up straight rock." McCoy dropped down to sit beside Kirk. "He's got some idea that there may be some vegetation we can use to help with the infection. He didn't see any when he was below so

he's considering trying above us." He held up a silver packet. "Try some more water?"

Kirk drank some more. It went down easier this time. Remembering McCoy's comment about Spock, he asked, "Not going to try is he?"

McCoy touched his forehead. "If he does, it'll be safe. He's not into unsafe stunts like some people I know."

Kirk glanced at McCoy. "Watch it, or I'm going to add something obscene to your epitaph."

"You're in no position to threaten me." The Doctor replaced the cloth on his forehead and then began the oddly comforting massage on his scalp again.

"You keep forgetting I am your superior officer." Kirk sighed softly. "Feels soothing."

"What?"

"When you do that, it helps me relax."

There was a minute pause. "Spock says I'm using a form of mind touch when I'm doing this."

Hearing the tightness in the Doctor's voice, Kirk watched his face. "That frightens you, doesn't it?"

"Good lord, yes! Of course it does. It's the same reason I don't like this resonance either. I don't want anything to do with mucking around in someone else's mind or anyone in mine. You know why I feel so strongly about it, Jim."

"Perhaps it would help if I understood the reason, Doctor." Spock had entered so quietly neither man had heard his approach.

"Spock!" McCoy exclaimed, turning sharply. "You're worse than having a cat around. Don't sneak up on me like that! Did you find a way out?"

Spock's eyes sought Kirk's for a moment during McCoy's tirade, then rested back on the Doctor. "No, I have not. Your statement before indicated that Jim is aware of a reason for your discomfort with mental techniques."

Kirk almost sighed when McCoy began to talk his way around the answer. "It's not hard to figure out, Spock. Your Katra and I hardly got along. And then the experience with the Fal Tor Pan was no picnic for me either."

Spock did sigh. "I am well aware of these events. I do not believe this is what you were referring to."

"Bones," Kirk prompted softly.

"Jim, I don't think . . ." McCoy began. Finally he nodded, "Spock, you better sit down. I don't think you're going to like this."

The Doctor swallowed, glancing at Kirk for a moment. "On our first tour aboard the Enterprise together, we encountered the parallel universe. Do you remember this incident?"

Although Spock's memory was faulty in some areas of their history, Kirk had generally found that he knew the details of all their missions. The Vulcan nodded, kneeling on the opposite side of the Captain.

"We encountered the savage counterparts. Your counterpart was a man of honor in his world yet the culture was radically different from ours." McCoy paused again. "The parallel Spock . . . to discover who we were . . . forced me to mind meld with him."

Kirk watched the Vulcan assimilate the information and seconds later, fight to keep the horror from his face and voice.

"He . . . forced you?"

McCoy took the question as a challenge to his honesty, not the disbelief Spock meant. The Doctor's face flushed with anger. "Yes, forced, godammit. As in rape. He raped my mind to get the information."

Kirk knew from past conversations with Spock that he considered this the most abhorrent crime a Vulcan could commit. The color drained from Spock's face and for one brief moment he swayed and Kirk could see the shock as his friend digested the information. "Raped? My counterpart raped . . . your mind?"

McCoy grabbed Spock's arm to steady him. He looked down at Kirk in between them, "I told you this wasn't a good idea."

"I am all right, Doctor." Spock withdrew from McCoy's touch, drawing himself inward. It was Kirk he turned to, anger lighting the depths of the hooded eyes. "You've known of this?" At Kirk's nod, he demanded, "For how long?"

"Since it happened."

"Why?" Spock turned his questioning gaze on McCoy. "Why did you keep this from me? Do you fear me so much?"

McCoy dropped his hand down to rest on Kirk's arm. "Frankly Spock, you've hit the nail on the head. I was terrified of you. I knew that I needed treatment but it would involve mental techniques. I believed I would end up totally insane. I realized, after time passed, that I had been totally irrational."

"In not seeking assistance, you are fortunate you did not become insane." The dark eyes glittered as they stared down at Kirk. "You could have requested a neutral telepath for him. I do not understand why you took such a risk."

"I tried. At first, he was so terrified of anyone touching his mind, keeping him calm became a primary focus. Then, I tried every argument in the book but couldn't win."

"Spock, it wasn't Jim's fault. You know how I play dirty pool. I tricked him into not telling you."

"You are attempting to tell me that you have carried this trauma, this fear all this time?" Spock could not seem to get his voice under control. The hoarse whisper was painful to hear. "And then, without your consent, I forced my Katra on you."

"You don't think I was afraid of you all these years, do you?" McCoy asked. "I was deathly afraid of someone touching my mind, yes. Even you. But, I trusted you, trust you now with my life. My reaction to your Katra was due to my fear, the consequences . . . I subconsciously fought you every step of the way. There was no way for your Katra to integrate with my mind. If I hadn't," His voice dropped to a ragged whisper. "If I had accepted your help so many years ago, then maybe we wouldn't have left you on Genesis. Maybe David would still be alive. And Jim wouldn't have been forced to watch the Enterprise be destroyed by his own hand."

Kirk had to draw a steady breath against the sudden onslaught of pain. Pain at McCoy's words. With a shaking hand, he grabbed McCoy's arm. "It wasn't your fault."

"No, Doctor." Spock added. "If anyone is to blame, it is I. By placing my Katra in you, a sequence of events was set in motion."

Kirk was beginning to shake. "Stop it! Neither of you were to blame. I have to believe what happened was meant to be. I can't live with it---" A strong chill caught him unaware and he

broke off moaning. Pain sliced through his thoughts, bringing his world to a stand still.

Chills were racking Kirk's body, the intensity increasing with each new wave. Kirk's battle against admitting to the pain was lost rapidly as broken bones shifted from the continuous shaking. Placing the covers over him seemed to have no effect. Holding the Captain's shoulders firmly down, Spock looked up to see his own feelings of helplessness and panic reflected in the Doctor's eyes.

"Spock, we've got to stop this!"

The moans were changing to strangled screams. Spock gripped the shoulders tightly.

"What can we do?"

"Not very dammed much!" McCoy snapped. "He needs an antipyretic and a relaxant that will stop the chills. The worse the chills are the higher his fever will be. We can continue to try to cool him down by bathing him. If it didn't mean moving him, I'd suggest making a mudbath for him."

Spock nodded. He lifted a hand to lightly touch Kirk's temple. "Doctor, I believe I can assist through a light mind touch. It does not require a deep meld. If you will permit me?"

Kirk seemed unaware of their presence, confused and fighting their attempts to keep him still. McCoy bit his lip, debating. "The healers didn't mention a difference in the degree of mind touch. Are you sure you can handle this?"

"Are you sure you can handle this, if you do not allow me to try?" The black eyes bored into his, the reasoning punctuated by a small cry and plea for help from Kirk.

"Do it," McCoy agreed.

Spock carefully placed both hands on Kirk's face and temples. Circumventing the neural network, he sent a simplistic message to the hypothalamus to reduce the body's core temperature. The effort required was minimal and he followed the neural synapses to turn off the automatic response to the toxins invading Kirk's body. The results were slow and as the chilling decreased, Spock was increasingly aware of the agony Kirk was enduring.

McCoy was calling him back. Spock paused. To assist Jim further would require entering a deeper link. Hearing a lonely cry in the dark beyond, he pressed his hands firmly on the link points. His awareness of McCoy and the cave faded to nothingness. The link was almost instantaneously achieved, the barrier that had kept him separate from Jim these long months finally torn down.

'I am here, Jim. Lean on me. Let me be your shield.'

Tears. A smile. Felt rather than seen.

'Haven't you always been?'

'Yes. As you have been for me.'

Pain, unrelenting and white-hot, battered at the edges of the meld.

Spock stepped between the pain and absorbed the impact with all the strength he could summon.

And failed.

Kirk's scream of pain hit him at the same moment as the backlash of agony though the meld. Overwhelmed, he felt blackness tear the meld to shreds and he sank into it.

McCoy leapt around Kirk in time to catch Spock as he slumped over. He had suspected something was wrong. Once the chilling had stopped, the Vulcan's refusal to break the link had alerted McCoy they were in trouble. Now, carefully lowering him to the ground, the Doctor checked his pulse and pupil response. Kirk was still moaning, calling out for Spock. Knowing he could do nothing more at the present for the Vulcan, McCoy turned back to the Captain.

"Jim, Spock's right here." He caught the sides of Kirk's face. "Jim, look at me. Do you understand?"

The eyes were glazed with pain and fever. Two bright pink spots on his cheeks telling McCoy that the fever was rising alarmingly. At least Spock had managed to stop the chills for the moment.

"Spock...got...to help . . ." Kirk struggled to pull free of McCoy's grasp.

McCoy glared briefly at Spock's still form. Just as he had predicted, the Captain would ignore his own injury to ensure Spock was safe. "Jim, listen to me. It's Bones. Spock's all right, Jim."

He got no response. Kirk was lost in a world of delirium and pain. His eyes fluttered closed and he drifted into a restless sleep, interrupted by frequent moans. McCoy's throat tightened in empathetic pain. Remembering the Captain's words from earlier, the Doctor let his fingers gently glide down the scalp, repeating the soothing motion again and again. It took several minutes before he noticed that Kirk seemed quieter. Not stopping, he continued the massage unaware of the time or his own growing weariness.

It took Spock physically removing his hand from Kirk's head for McCoy to regain awareness of his surroundings. The Vulcan knelt before him, the saturnine face reflecting the exhaustion McCoy was feeling. The Doctor blinked, glancing back at Kirk.

Spock pulled his attention back, touching him on the shoulder. "The Captain is resting at the moment. I believe you need to rest as well."

"Spock?" He felt as if he were swimming slowly up through murky water to the surface. "You all right?"

"I am unharmed." Tightness edged the words. "Come, you must replenish your energy reserves."

McCoy obediently followed Spock across the chamber to the packets of water and food. His knees were shaking after the few steps and he sank to the floor, suddenly dizzy. "Feel sorta strange."

A packet of food was placed in his hands. "I will explain. But first, you must eat."

The packet was a warm gelatin. After the first few sips, he immediately felt better. McCoy held the packet out, "Spock, Jim could use this nourishment. His metabolism needs the glucose."

Spock had his own packet and was sitting across from McCoy. He shook his head firmly. "You need to take it all, Doctor. Your system has also been depleted. He needs you just as badly as the food."

McCoy frowned but did as he was instructed. The warmth it provided seemed to spread from his stomach outward. He smiled wanly, "It feels like a glass of good wine." He glanced over at Spock. "What time is it? I seemed to have lost track."

"Somewhere near midnight, I believe." Spock winced suddenly and lifted a hand to his temple.

Alarmed by the action and the response, McCoy watched him closely. "You don't know the time?"

"Not at present. My time sense seems to be impaired." He dropped his hand.

"I thought you said you were all right." McCoy asked anxiously. Spock did not reply, staring instead at his packet of food. The Doctor finished the gelatin. "You said you would explain."

Spock allowed his head to rest against the wall behind him. "Using mental techniques drains the system of huge amounts of glucose."

There was a long pause. McCoy, wondering what this had to do with Spock, felt obligated to fill in the silence. "Yes, because glucose is the main source of energy for the brain. I understand that."

"You depleted your resources of glucose and needed an immediate replacement." The eyes slid closed, as if the explanation had taken the last bit of energy from the Vulcan.

McCoy mouth fell open. "Spock, what the hell are you talking about? You're the one who collapsed cold while attempting to meld with Jim."

Spock opened his eyes, turning to look at Kirk. "Whether you're willing to admit it or not, you used a mild form of a mind touch to ease his pain, sustaining it for several hours, far past your safety factor."

He wanted to deny it. Would have given anything to tell Spock he was wrong. McCoy grimaced. It might be the truth, but he did not have to acknowledge it. He studied the drawn features across from him with a clinical eye. "Spock, you look like you've been to hell and back. What happened?"

"I now accept the wisdom of your advice, Doctor. I do not have the capability to sustain a deep meld. My attempt to do so hurt Jim and has caused a damage to my neural network. I am . . . affected by it but believe it will be temporary. It leaves me without any ability to help Jim."

Exhaustion was strongly evident in the hesitant words. McCoy wanted to ask what exactly Spock meant by 'affected' but felt the Vulcan was pushed beyond his limits. "Spock, it'll be all right. You can't blame yourself." He touched his arm, reinforcing his words and then rose wearily to check on Kirk. He seemed to be deeply asleep.

"Doctor," Spock called hoarsely. "You must rest. I will awaken you if needed. While Jim is resting, you must also."

"But . . ."

"Leonard, you can help him. I cannot. He will need you. Please rest."

The ragged whisper tore at McCoy's soul. He knew what it cost Spock to admit this. He nodded, stretching out on the ground. The difference between waking and sleeping became a matter of only a few heartbeats.

The sound of someone moaning woke him. For a moment, he was disoriented. It was still dark outside and there was a damp chill in the air.

He could see Spock holding Kirk, speaking softly. At McCoy's approach, Spock stopped speaking and looked up at the Doctor with open trust. Trust that he could help Jim? Trust that

he would do whatever was necessary? McCoy felt a shiver run through him and convinced himself it was the cool night air.

Retrieving his scanner, McCoy moved to Kirk's side with determination. There had to be something he could do to pull the Captain safely through the next few hours. He settled the lightcam where it would not shine in the two men's eyes and begin to examine Kirk. His pulse was racing erratically as McCoy expected it would be. The coolness of his hands and both feet added another worry. Jim's circulation was already being compromised. His scanner confirmed this diagnosis. Despite the cold extremities, the fever was remaining high. Yet now, McCoy took the fever as a sign his body was still fighting back, if it started falling now without receiving intervention for the infection, they would lose him.

The Captain moved restlessly, Spock restraining him gently as McCoy scanned his chest. No signs of congestion. One small miracle in their favor. But the respirations were uneven, rapid with occasions of apnea. Sepsis. Full blown. Shock. Difficult to save even if treatment were begun immediately. The only thing McCoy could do here was to keep him warm and try to get fluids down him, not enough to save his life.

Kirk cried out but the sound was weak even in McCoy's ears. "Help...help Spock. Bones...don't turn away...help him..."

McCoy's eyes flew to Spock's face, seeing the haunted eyes, deep lines shadowing his face. "Has he been awake at all?"

Spock shook his head. "He becomes quiet when I speak, but he never seems to understand I am here."

Kirk had stopped talking but in the silence, his pleading began again.

"He is growing weaker," Spock stated, but McCoy heard the question.

"Yes." McCoy could not deny his words. "How long until the Enterprise arrives?"

Spock began to gently rock Kirk again. "Seven point three hours."

The Doctor closed his eyes. Too long. Help would be too long in arriving. "Spock, you said only I could help him." Fear squeezed his heart. "How?"

Spock answered in a slow monotone as if he were spiraling down the same deadly path with Kirk. "I referred to your empathic skill yet I spoke rashly. The Captain's condition has deteriorated rapidly. You cannot help him now and would be endangered with any attempt."

"Come on, Spock. That's not good enough." McCoy spoke harshly, forcibly drawing Spock back. "Explain exactly how I could help."

The eyes glittered with renewed light. "Doctor, you have no training. Jim needs someone to sustain him until help arrives. My attempt only succeeded in causing him more pain. I would not presume to think that you could succeed where I cannot."

McCoy narrowed his eyes suspiciously. If Spock was using reverse psychology on him, it was working. "Just because you can't doesn't mean that I would fail."

Spock tightened his arms around Kirk as if to protect him from McCoy. "Your fear is real, McCoy. I feel it. It would overshadow your attempt and send him on toward death and pull you with him."

"You're not willing to let me try?" he asked, disbelieving.

"Not unless you can conquer your fear."

McCoy rose abruptly. "Damn you, Spock. Let me help him." He looked down to find understanding shining in the Vulcan's eyes. He turned away, acknowledging the truth to himself.

He stumbled over to the cave wall. Sliding down the rough support, he drew his knees up and buried his face in his hand.

The moans were dwindling down to a deadly quiet. Kirk's breathing was more labored, and McCoy was able to hear the increased irregularity with heart stopping agony. Being a physician had never meant so little as now. His knowledge was totally useless, only serving to increase his own misery.

McCoy felt battered, as exhausted as if he had been in a fight for his own life. Fear. Spock knew his fear. Damn right. He was afraid for Kirk's life. But it was more than that. His fear would overshadow any attempt to help Jim. He wasn't afraid of helping him. But his shoulders slumped as he acknowledged what he was afraid of . . . losing his sanity. His hands were trembling as the memory of the rape from so many years ago vividly confronted him. The first night after they had returned from the parallel universe, Kirk had found him in his quarters on the floor, crying like a baby. The Captain had held him just as Spock was holding Kirk now. Rocking, soothing. Helping him.

He had done enough reading on the subject now to understand that he had actually experienced trauma that left a tearing of his mind. It had taken a long time to recover and it was possible some of his fear was from some remnants of unhealed trauma. The unreasoning panic that he felt was not only mental but physical as well.

It did not help. McCoy drew his knees tighter. Whether the fear was mental or physical, it was real, tangible.

The room was growing colder as if the air was being drawn from the room with Kirk's spirit. His breathing had changed, no longer labored but gasping with each breath. At times, he would stop breathing entirely for seconds that stretched like days. Then his body would fight to live, his indomitable spirit refusing to give in to this last, greatest enemy.

McCoy lowered his head again. It would not be long now. And in losing Kirk, he sensed he was also losing Spock. The Vulcan might not be able to win in life, but he could triumph finally in death.

"The key is trust, Leonard." Spock touched his hand, startling McCoy. Kirk lay alone, pale and still. "Trust. You must trust both of us with your heart and mind."

"I do, Spock." McCoy reached up to cover the hand on his arm. "You know I do."

Spock nodded, sharing a gentle smile. McCoy felt something unlock in his heart, acknowledging and defeating his fear. It was that simple. He followed Spock back to Kirk's side.

Laying his hand on Kirk's head, he heard Spock's voice guiding him, telling him to follow his instincts. Find Jim. Must find Jim. Except for Spock's hand on his shoulder, the room around him, all physical reality faded. Trust.

Awareness returned but in a different way. He was walking but knew that the plane of existence he now inhabited was not "real". Something compelled him to continue, to go forward. Something---no, someone waited for him.

The darkness lifted and he began to make out shapes in the distance. Mountains, dark and forbidding. Clouds that massed and moved and fretted with lightning. There were no colors, only black and white and shades of grey. There was something that he must do but he could not remember what it was. Suddenly, fear grasped at him like a living thing. No, more than fear. Stark terror. He had been here before, but the terrain had been more forbidding,

threatening. Twisting and tearing his mind. He had to turn back. He could not fight this battle again.

Then he saw Jim. Far off, trudging upward toward the mountains. Shoulders hunched against a cold wind that suddenly howled down from the mountains.

'Jim! Wait! Wait for me!' he called but the figure continued on, unknowing or uncaring, it scarcely mattered.

Now he knew what he must do. He must overtake Kirk before he reached the mountains. But the fear was stronger there. He could feel it. Tattered whispers that tore at his mind. He would not retreat, but he could not go forward.

'Trust.'

The word whispered reassuringly, easing the fear. He took a step forward. Jim was headed into danger. They would have to help each other.

The climb was getting treacherous. His feet slipping on the loose rock, McCoy felt a moment of exasperation. 'Jim, does it always have to be climbing rocks with you?'

Jim was clambering over a boulder. McCoy's words caused him to pause but only for a precious second. The distance between them increased. He tried running but only succeeded in falling again and again. Each time it was an effort to push back the fear as he tried to move forward.

'Jim!' he cried again, knowing it to be futile. Jim would disappear into the mountain of death and he would see him no more.

He sank to his knees, covering his face with his hands. He could not bear to watch his friend die yet he could not let him die alone. Struggling to his feet, he fought his way forward again, only to lose his footing and slide further away from Jim.

There must be something he could do. He had been sent to help. And he had failed. McCoy lifted a hand in supplication, calling out in defeat to Spock.

'You are wrong, Doctor. You have not failed.'

The deep voice sounded beside him. When he turned, Spock was there, offering his hand.

'What I could not do alone, we can do together. We can save Jim.'

McCoy reached out, grasping Spock's hand, grasping at the hope that he offered as well.

At the moment their hands met, Jim was suddenly only a few feet from them, still struggling away toward the mountains.

'Jim! Wait! Don't leave us!' McCoy called.

When Kirk turned to face them, a small, sad smile crossed his features.

'I have to, Bones. Don't you see? That's my deepest fear. Not death but life, life without you and Spock. Alone. I know that now.'

The plain around them shifted, twisted, and McCoy and Spock were in Kirk's apartment, watching as Sarek melded with him, watching somehow inside the meld as Kirk relived the horror of losing Spock in the reactor room.

'I thought I knew what being alone meant but, like death, I never really knew until that moment. Then, on Mount Seleya, I feared that I would lose you both. I knew that either all of us would leave that mountain alive---or none of us would. After that long, horrible night, I knew as well that I did not want to be the one left behind.'

All the risk taking, all the dangerous stunts Kirk had pulled in the last several weeks, it was just as McCoy had feared. He would not take his own life but if fate intervened, it would

solve his horrible dilemma. McCoy remembered telling Spock once that he was not afraid of death, he was more afraid to live. Now, he knew that the Vulcan was not the only one.

And he knew that Kirk's deepest fear was one they all shared. They were once more on the plain, the dark, fierce mountains very close now.

'We won't go back without you, Jim,' they said, each reaching out a hand.

Still Kirk hesitated. 'I've lost so much Bones, I don't know if I want to risk that kind of pain again.'

'You've fought too hard to live these past hours, Jim. I don't believe you want to die. But it's your choice.'

Hazel eyes filled with tears that had long needed to be shed. All the pain, all the loss, all the terror of the last month spilled over.

Spock reached out to take his hand. 'Just as you knew we would all leave Mount Seleya together, we will leave this place together, or not at all.'

Kirk smiled, a real, true, well-remembered smile, and took each of their hands in his. 'Let's get the hell out of here.'

When McCoy opened eyes he did not remember closing, he was lying on a bed in sickbay. The Enterprise. Scotty stood at his side. "Jim?"

Scott patted his arm. "He's on full life support. Christine says it's a miracle that he was alive. She says he'll make it."

McCoy felt eyes on him and swiveled his head to see Spock regarding him calmly from the bed next to him. He smiled. This was a beginning, not an ending. Of course Jim would make it. They all would.



seaQuest

OSV

Transition: 2032

By Steven H. Wilson

"No, stupid, like this!" the boy exclaimed. His tone was fond, though. He took the beach ball off the nose of the dolphin and tossed it straight up, positioning himself so that, when it came down again, it hit his forehead and sailed across the pool.

The dolphin clicked happily and went in pursuit. The teenager, shaking his head, watched after her. As she once again took charge of the ball, he gestured and called to her--in a human approximation of her own dolphin clicks--to imitate his stunt. She didn't.

He sighed. He was a handsome kid, almost nineteen. He still preferred the company of dolphins to humans, despite their continual inability to understand the human customs he tried to teach them.

"At this rate it'll be a year before I get them to hit it over a net."

"And," added Kristen Westphalen with a smile, "it'll be another damned century before the Olympics Committee approves human/dolphin water volleyball as an event!"

"Pessimist!" the boy sneered.

"Realist," she corrected him. She scooted her lounge chair backwards, getting more of it under the pool side umbrella. It was nearing noon, and getting hot. Caesar didn't mind the heat, but he was in the water--practically his native element. He'd complained bitterly about having to wear even the briefest of swimsuits, but his father had insisted. While Kristen was visiting, nudity would be curbed.

Malcolm Landsdowne really was an old prude, she thought; his dropout lifestyle at Caicos Cay notwithstanding. When it came to women, he put them on just as high a pedestal as any Victorian of two centuries earlier. There was a certain charm to his formality, though. More, it was a great comfort to her to have some link to Nathan.

Nathan... he'd been declared dead three years ago, as had they all: Miguel, Tim, Jonathan and Lucas. She missed them all, but, of course, missed Nathan and Lucas most. Even though she and Nathan had called a halt to their romantic entanglement, and he and Lucas had set off on a new tour of duty, at least they been only an ocean or so away.

Now she didn't even know what had happened to them.

She came here so often for the link to the past. Malcolm was Nathan's oldest friend. Caesar, who shared with Lucas his love of dolphins, at least made her feel there was still youth and energy in the world. The boy had come far since his father had been imprisoned and Malcolm

had adopted him. He'd opened up, begun to speak again--he hadn't, for so long. It was good to see.

Something cold pressed itself against her shoulder, and Kristen jumped with a small cry. Behind her, Malcolm grinned and held out the glass of lemonade that had been the source of the cold.

"Refill?" he asked pleasantly. His hairline was receding, and the unkempt spill about his collar was gray, but he was still the same beach bum he'd always been.

She shook her head. "Dammit, I thought some huge reptile from the wilds of the island had slither up behind me."

"Only me," he said innocently.

"Then my first guess wasn't far off." She snatched the lemonade and took a long drink. "Thank you. Do that again and I'll feed you to those dolphins."

"They wouldn't eat red meat."

"I'll batter-fry you and serve the bits in newspaper--they'll think it's fish sticks."

"You have a wicked imagination for a Doctor."

"Comes of fraternizing with criminal elements."

He chuckled. "I've missed your sharp comebacks, Kristen." He jerked his head at the pool. "Nature boy over here isn't much for conversation even when he does surface."

"I'll bet he's got a lot to say. Who could get a word in edgewise with you?"

He shook a finger at her. "You see, I'd never notice that. We need a woman's viewpoint around here."

She shook her head. "Don't go down that path again. We've been there too many times."

More than once, Malcolm had asked Kristen to join him at his island retreat. She'd refused every time. They had much in common--too much, she thought. Alone here, they'd kill each other. Besides, Kristen knew, as Malcolm did, that any relationship she entered into with him would just be an attempt to hold onto the past, and Nathan.

Her final conversation with Nathan Bridger was still clearly etched in her mind. They'd spent four weeks together at his island home, doing very little except relaxing after their year's tour of duty on *seaQuest*. It had been an exciting time, a time for exploring their feelings for each other, for recovering from stresses and traumas both recent and long past. It had been a necessary time.

But they'd both known, at the end of it, that they'd have to return to their chosen places in the world outside the bounds of Bridger's Island. He planned to oversee the construction and launch of *seaQuest* II, she to go into research with Susan, her daughter.

She had, in fact, been the one who said to him while they walked on the pier outside his house, "Nathan, I think we need to be honest with each other. We're not traveling the same path, are we?"

"Aren't we?" he'd asked with that bemused look he so often got.

She'd linked her arm in his and patted his hand. "Don't play games with me. I'm too old for that nonsense."

"I'm only going on a tour of duty. It's not like I won't get shore leave--"

"--which you'll spend fine-tuning your boat's systems and nursemaiding your officers through personal crises. Be honest."

He'd rolled his eyes. "I may be a little hard to get hold of."

"And I'll be buried in research with Susan."

His eyes had dropped. For a minute, he hadn't looked at her.

"We have to be mature, Nathan. I can't ask you to commit to me when you're already committed to *seaQuest*. I'm not sure I want to have any ties now either, except for Susan."

"Are you sure?"

She'd nodded, unable to speak past the lump growing in her throat.

"If it's what you want, Kristen--"

He'd said it so gently, so meaningfully, with so much hurt and concern in his voice, that she couldn't stop herself from crying.

"Just shut up and hold me, Nathan," she's said against his chest. Then she'd sobbed for what seemed like hours.

It wasn't something she'd wanted to do, pushing him away; but so many things had made it seem necessary. There was the way he looked at Carol's pictures, every time he walked through the living room. There was the tone he'd get in his voice when he showed Kristen some little knick-knack Carol had bought, curtains she'd sewn, books she'd loved.

There was the awkwardness which had pre-empted their attempt to make love in his bedroom--Carol's bedroom. Her ghost was there with him, watching him, and he couldn't be with another woman in that place.

Bottom line: for Nathan, Carol Bridger was still very much alive. Kristen wasn't willing to be "the other woman" to someone who'd been dead two years.

In the end, they'd both agreed Kristen was right. Avoiding ties that would get in the way of their work was the right thing to do. When *seaQuest*'s tour of duty was up, he'd call her. Maybe then...

But *seaQuest*'s tour had never officially ended. She'd just disappeared one day, with her crew. For a decade, she'd become one of the modern mysteries of the deep. Just the week before, one of the networks had done a special on famous disappearances. Whetting the public's appetite to hear about the loss of the Marie Celeste and Amelia Earhart had been the story of the *seaQuest*.

Kristen hadn't watched.

She and Nathan had spoken only rarely during that year before he'd vanished. It had been a busy time for both of them. Lucas, with more time to spend firing off messages into the ether, had written her often. He'd told her of the growing closeness between Nathan and his new CMO, Wendy Smith. Kristen had met Wendy, a pretty young girl, daughter of one of Nathan's old friends.

Well, he'd moved on, she told herself. It was time for her to do the same. And she had moved on to relationships with other men--six of them, in the last ten years. The longest had lasted six months. When she was being honest with herself, she had to admit that the only constant male companion in her life was Malcolm.

Malcolm, who had been talking to her for some minutes now, and she hadn't heard a word he'd said. She turned to him and smiled.

"Sorry. I drifted off."

Caesar snorted a chuckle. "Dad has that effect on people."

"Quiet you," snapped Malcolm. He looked back at Kristen. "I asked what you're planning to do now that Susan has shipped off to Asia."

"Well--"

He raised a finger. "Hold that thought. Your detour into the dark recesses of your soul has delayed this conversation. It's five o'clock, and I want to see if the Oscars have snubbed McCauley Culkin yet again."

He fumbled through a stack of data cartridges on his table and came up with a battered remote. He pressed a button, and the holographic display flashed into being over the pool.

But the anticipated report on the gifted director's award status was not what they saw in the shimmering field that appeared. Rather, they saw the image of a young man: blond, unkempt, dressed in a shabby coverall, and still very much an eighteen-year-old.

"Lucas!" Kristen blurted out.

"Impossible," said Malcolm. "He's dead--at least he's missing. And he'd be almost thirty by now."

"Shut up!" Kristen snapped. "Turn up the damned sound!"

The commentator confirmed what Kristen already knew. Lucas Wolenczak, missing this past decade, had suddenly appeared at a UEO conference and attempted to attack Secretary General McGath. Inside sources had offered no explanation for Wolenczak's sudden re-appearance, and refused to speculate on his apparent youth. As to *seaQuest* and her crew, Captain Oliver Hudson of the UEO was investigating...

"Wow," Malcolm muttered.

Caesar had climbed from the pool, and was examining the image of Lucas. "I remember him," he said thoughtfully. "He taught the dolphins to talk."

Kristen nodded, never taking her eyes from the image, even long after it faded and was replaced by a commercial hyping Microsoft's '33 model luxury sedans. "Yes, Lucas taught the dolphins to talk," she said automatically. Then she came back to life. "What the hell is he doing, attacking McGath? Where's he been? What--?"

Malcolm's hands came quickly to her shoulders, soothing her. He shushed her rapid-fire questions, and she realized she was bordering on hysteria. It was just so damned shocking! Lucas was alive, and that could mean the others were as well.

"I know what you're thinking," Malcolm said. "If Lucas is alive--"

She nodded. "Nathan may be too. But if he is--if they are--where have they been hiding?"

"Do you think they have been? Hiding?"

She sniffed. "Well, I wouldn't put it past Nathan, would you?"

"He's done it before."

"So he has," she agreed thoughtfully. "But it looks like Lucas has done more than slip off to a deserted island. He hasn't aged. It would take some sort of cryogenic process, or--" She broke off, grabbing Malcolm's hand. "It doesn't matter. If Nathan's alive--if there's any possibility--we have to go look for him."

"Where?"

"Where else? Where he always goes when he wants to drop out of sight--that damned island of his."

"But it was destroyed in the first Macronesian advance," protested Malcolm.

"Not destroyed, just leveled. Would that stop Nathan Bridger?"

"I guess you wanna go right now."

She nodded emphatically. "Yes. Come with me?"

"Of course. You gonna tell him?"

"Tell him?"

"That after ten years you haven't gotten over him?"

She started to protest, to say that she was just concerned for the safety of a dear friend. Then she wondered why she should lie to Malcolm. He knew her better than anyone. "Am I that transparent?"

"No, I was just guessing. All I really know is he never got over you. He just wanted to give you space to continue your research."

Could that be true, she wondered? "I don't believe you. *seaQuest* was his first love."

"First love doesn't often last. Tell him."

"First we have to find him. Let's get the hell out of here!"

For Kristen, knowing that the island had been devastated by a hail of incendiary bombs and seeing that actual damage were two different things. Tears came to her eyes as she and Malcolm stepped out of the launch they'd piloted up to where the dock had once been. It was gone now. From this vantage, the house was visible--what was left of it, anyway. What had once been a cheerful bungalow was now a charred ruin, fit together out of jagged sections of wall that only suggested the shape of a house. Her first impression was that Nathan--if he were alive and had come here--would have found nothing worth returning to. No one could live here anymore, and trying to restore the place would be just too demoralizing for someone who had loved it as much as Nathan had.

They were surprised when a cry came from the ruin. It was not a cry of alarm or anguish, but one of glee, a child's cry.

"What the--?" Malcolm demanded.

From out of the rubble dashed a small boy with blond, almost-white hair. He careened forward, oblivious of his observers, moving in that way small boys do which suggests they don't care if they fall and skin knees or bump heads. Immediately behind him, also running, was a woman. She was about forty, dark both in hair and complexion, and dressed in grubby clothes. She looked as though she'd been spending considerable time cleaning up inside.

Kristen's first thought was that they were squatters, refugees who'd found the island after being displaced in a Macronesian raid. But the boy looked nothing like the woman who appeared to be caring for him.

"Michael!" she snapped.

The boy stopped short, though not as a result of her reprimanding tone, it seemed. He had spotted Kristen and Malcolm. He stared at them, eyes wide, appraising. The woman now noticed them as well. Her face was alive with unhidden fear. Apparently, she knew all too well how dangerous the islands were in this time of political upheaval.

Kristen tried to sound reassuring. "It's all right. We're not here to hurt you. We're friends of... the man who used to live here."

The woman seemed to consider that. She looked skeptically at Kristen and asked, "What was his name?"

The woman's use of the past tense alarmed her. Was she going to say that Nathan was dead, after all? Kristen reprimanded herself for being silly. She'd accepted that Nathan was dead years ago... hadn't she?

"His name is Nathan Bridger," said Malcolm. "This island belongs to his heirs."
The woman smiled now. She pointed to the boy and said, "Captain Bridger's heir is here."

"What?" Kristen demanded.

"This is Michael Bridger," the woman explained. "The Captain's grandson. I am Maria, his governess."

"Nathan had no grandchildren," said Malcolm, slightly offended.

"Not that he was aware of when he left earth, no," said Maria.

"When he left... earth?" Kristen asked, unbelieving.

Maria nodded so seriously that it seemed impossible she was inventing her outlandish tale. "When his submarine vanished ten years ago, Captain Bridger and his crew were kidnapped by members of a civilization on another world. The *seaQuest* was taken there to participate in a battle between rival powers. For them, very little time has passed--and they are little older than when they left. For us, on earth, it has been ten years. I do not understand the mechanics of it, but Captain Bridger assures me that that is the nature of interstellar travel."

Malcolm nodded. "Relativistic suspension of time. It--"

Kristen slapped his shoulder. "Shut up, Downy. Maria, is Nathan--Captain Bridger--here?"

"No," said Maria. "He came here after he found Michael. He was starting to make plans, to look for Michael's father--"

"Robert Bridger is dead," Kristen interrupted.

Maria shrugged. "Apparently not. He allowed his father to believe he was dead, but, sometime in the last ten years he married, had a child, and abandoned that child at an embassy, where Captain Bridger found him."

"Where is Captain Bridger now?" asked Malcolm.

"A friend of his came--Lucas... something."

"Lucas Wolenczak?" Kristen prompted.

"Yes. They left in a hurry. They said they had to find *seaQuest*--"

Kristen frowned at Malcolm. "Gone looking for his first love."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Malcolm. He had a stupendously idiotic grin on his face, and he was pointing toward the water...

...toward Nathan Bridger, getting out of a UEO boat and walking up the beach toward them, whistling. His hands were jauntily stuffed into the pockets of his loose shorts.

For a moment, Kristen was speechless. She stared at Nathan, who hadn't noticed them yet. "He's probably just come back to get his things," she muttered.

Malcolm chuckled. "You mean those special chunks of rubble he's so sentimental about?"

"Well, he... may want to take the boy on *seaQuest*."

"Yeah, another kid on the boat's all he needs."

"Look at him!" She pointed at Nathan, who'd barely changed since she'd last seen him.

"... It's been ten years. I'm fifty-eight, and he's still--"

"Sixty-two?"

She slapped him on the shoulder. "Dammit, Downy, d'ya think I'm just gonna go running into his arms and fall down on the sand with him in a passionate moment out of 'Casablanca?' I hate sand in my hair!"

"It was 'From Here to Eternity,' and it looks like Nathan's got something very like that on his mind. Excuse me. I'll leave you two alone." He hooked his arm into Maria's and pulled her toward the ruined house. "Maria, where can a renegade biologist get anything to eat around here?"

Kristen shook her head. Malcolm's phlegmatic style would never change, she reflected. From the direction of the water, a familiar voice called out in surprise. "Kristen?"

She turned. Nathan was running towards her, his face alive with happiness, his arms outstretched. She threw open her own arms and ran.

Sand in the hair was, after all, not so great an obstacle...





BABYLON

Future

By A. Wheeler

The station looked so different as she walked through the transit area. Quiet, not a soul to see; but many to feel. Her long dress flowing about her, she entered the empty station. She paused at the first bulkhead and reached out to touch it. As she did it all came back to her. Tears welled up in her eyes. She fought to hold them back.

He had warned her that it would tear her apart to return. But as always....she did what her heart told her was right not what he or anyone including herself knew was easier.

It had been many years since she walked these halls. Most of those who had been here were now gone beyond this reality into the next. She had been fortunate to survive. Many had not. There were times she wished she hadn't.

Her entourage followed her. He had chosen to remain aboard the private transit saying that he could not bear to watch her remember it all. Too many nights he had held her when she woke up screaming from the nightmares or crying from sorrow for friends she had lost. He had relented enough to come along, knowing that she would need his arms around her when she left this place once more.

Soon she and her party approached the place she sought. She reached up and brushed off the dust. The sign read..."Grey 17" and under it some smart aleck had written (and it was still there so many, many years later) "enter at your own risk." She smiled. Even now a truer statement had never been made.

As she began to enter the area she turned to her group and told them to wait. One protested loudly. Her look alone could still silence most. He said no more, more afraid of her wrath than of her husband who had employed him as her guardian for this journey.

They waited as she moved from the present into the past.

She started down the corridor that so long ago had been the way home for her. Pausing for a moment at the door to the lounge she was startled when it opened. There he stood as if he had been waiting for her all these many years.

"I knew you would be here," she said.

"Some said you would not return here and I knew you would be back," he replied.

They both laughed. Then she flashed that smile and he that grin and it was as if she had never left Grey 17 or Babylon 5.

"Are you here alone?" She hoped that if he was here so would others be.

"No, most have returned. More arrive with each passing year."

"I have wanted to come back for so long....it wasn't easy." It was said with both sadness and a longing for a time long past.

"Nothing important ever is." He paused as he took in how much she had changed and yet remained the same. She was still a formidable presence, but softened with the grace and confidence that comes with age.

"Do you want to visit with us now or later?" He knew that she needed to go at her own pace as she had always had done. No matter how much he wanted to share her time here, he knew that this was her journey, his had been completed years earlier.

"I think later."

"Then I will return when you are ready, but let me help you across this threshold." His hand reached out to her and hers to him.

When his hand touched hers she felt the warmth of his soul. She looked down and took her skirt in her hand. She slightly raised it to step across the beam that had fallen across the entrance.

When she looked up it was all as it had been. The area was clean and bright and full of the warmth and charm of its occupants and he was gone.

She moved through the lounge as the memories flooded her mind. There were too many to clearly see any of them. Moving swiftly through the lounge she exited the room and closed the door both on the memories and the lounge. It called to her as she moved through the corridor. She stopped at a door, and, like before, it opened. She stepped into what had been her quarters and let out a small gasp.

The room was just as she had left it, everything still in its place. Items she had not seen in years or had discarded were there as they had been. She moved to the chest of drawers and opened the second drawer and smiled. Neatly folded was what had started the heartache between her and her line sister. That they had gotten beyond the problem and even became closer comforted her. She touched it and knew why it was there. It belonged in this time and place.

She moved to the chair which one of the G-monkees had "acquired" for her to support her troublesome back. She sat and closed her eyes, allowing some of the memories to sweep over her.

On the transport her husband waited. He had not wanted her to come here and he definitely did not want to be here himself. So much had happened since they had left this place and he was one not to look back but forward. Yet ever since she had heard that there were plans to scrap the station she had been intent on trying to save it.

He had stood by her side more times than he could count while she tried to lobby the powers that be, insisting that the station should be saved, perhaps made into a museum to remind people of the lengths to which humans and aliens had gone to preserve freedom.

Another man, a bit younger, had also remained on board. He planned on going on the station later, after his friend returned. He knew that her odyssey, like his own, needed to be a private one.

He looked across the table toward her husband. The other man pulled out a deck of cards and started to play solitaire. The man looked up when he began to whistle.

"OK, I should have gone with her."

Marcus stopped whistling. "She'll be fine. She's among friends."

"You believe this coming full circle thing don't you?"

"Yes, for her this is where it all began. From here she moved on; eventually to her life with you. As long as the station was here she had a place to anchor herself to... a place she looked upon as home. When the plans came out to dismantle it and destroy what was left....she had to return....as did I."

"I still don't understand. The station is empty except for a skeleton crew. All she will find are memories. I know them. She still wakes up crying or trembling from the nightmares and dreams, though less now than in the past."

"There is a belief among some people that the spirit returns to the place where it was most content when the body no longer exists. She believes that she will find them in Grey 17 as I believe that I will find my friends elsewhere in the station."

"You are both nuts."

"Why thank you. That's the nicest thing anyone has said to me in weeks."

"Marcus. I keep thinking I should have gone with her....been there for her."

"But you are here for her. You came with her...allowed her the freedom to seek out this closure that she needs."

"Marcus, you should know that no one allows her to do anything. She does as she chooses, just as she always has done."

"You still don't understand that part of her, do you?" The other man gave a puzzled look. Since his wife had joined the Rangers, she and Marcus had been a team in a different sense than the word was usually used. Not that they worked together, though they did on occasion, it more of an underlying connection. Some how they had connected on a level that he could not understand.

"I wish I did."

"That you are here is what is important to her. She knows that you care enough to come with her and be here for her."

"But I still think I should have gone with her."

"If you had they would have stayed away."

"They?"

"Yes, the ones she needs to let go of."

Marcus got up and went to see the transport pilot about something. Her husband continued with his game of cards.

She had been gone several hours when her guardian became more nervous about his decision to let her proceed alone. He communicated to the transport and spoke to her husband, who was not happy about it, but had expected no less from his headstrong wife.

Looking at Marcus, preparing transport to the station, he was unsure whether the man could wait no longer to begin his own odyssey or if he, too, was concerned for her.

Either way her husband made a decision to set aside his own fear of returning, for the need to know for himself that she was safe. The longer she was gone the more the feeling had grown in him that she might not return.

So they disembarked together -- side by side -- as they had once in the past to rescue her. He hoped that this time a rescue would not be necessary. Her guardian met them at the entrance to Grey 17.

Looking at the shambles the place was in, he could not believe that the guardian had allowed her to proceed alone. But Marcus knew.

"Few other than the Ladies were truly comfortable past this point." Marcus looked up the corridor. "I believe her quarters were this way."

Her husband followed Marcus. He had put all that he knew of this place out of his mind when he had finally convinced her to leave. As they proceeded they became covered in the dirt and dust that permeated the place.

They reached the door of her quarters. As they looked in the open door -- for an instant her husband thought he saw someone kneeling at her side. At second glance there was no one -- no one but his wife, sitting and rocking in a chair, her eyes closed.

They approached and Marcus let out a low whistle as they both realized that although they had become covered in dust she, the chair and the immediate area around her were not.

She opened her eyes to see them standing there, and at once all had changed back to their reality. She looked at her husband and smiled.

"He was here, you know. He said you would come for me."

Her husband nodded.

"Might I have a few more minutes to say good-bye?" she asked him.

He reluctantly agreed as they all left the quarters to return to the lounge area. Once there Marcus left them to seek out his own closure, promising to meet them on board the transport later.

It was a very reluctant husband who left his wife in the lounge and stepped over the beam as he heard a voice say, "You told me once that if I couldn't take care of her, there would be another that would. I am glad to see that you are a man of your word."

He turned to see no one, but he had heard the voice and recognized it. He knew who it was even after all these years. And to the best of his knowledge that conversation had never been shared or remembered until now.

Even more he was determined to find a way to get her back to their reality and home, back where she could become immersed in their future, not her past.

In the lounge she stood and began to cry, afraid that the spell had been broken. As the tears fell, a hand reached out. She looked to see Zack handing her a tissue.

"We couldn't let you leave without a proper good-bye." And with that he grinned and motioned for her to look about the lounge. As she did all her friends gathered about her. They reached across time and space and reality to hug and talk to her. Even though it seemed that they were all talking at once, she heard each of them and felt their embraces.

She remembered that no matter how much they had argued and fussed with each other, the Ladies always worked it through as the family that they were. Then as suddenly as they had appeared; they were gone. She was left standing there with Zack.

She turned to him. "What will become of you when...?" she couldn't continue.

"We and our reality will continue." He reached out and took her hand in his.

"Then there will still be a Babylon 5 for all of you?" she said.

"And you," he paused to let what he was saying sink in, "if you choose, when the time comes."

He saw the hesitation in her eyes.

"Annie, dear sweet Annie. Even if it would be only to wait for him to take you elsewhere.....there would always be a place for you here."

He took her in his arms as he had done so many years ago, and gave her the good-bye kiss that had been denied him.

As he kissed her, she closed her eyes and muttered a soft, "I loved you, you know." She heard him say, "I knew. I've always known." She let go of him. When she opened her eyes, the lounge was as it had been when she and her husband had entered--barren and empty but not cold.

She crossed the beam and the threshold of the lounge and felt Zack's hand at her elbow assuring her safe passage back to the present where her husband waited for her.

As she exited Grey 17, the "he" of her future was waiting for her. One look at her told him that she had let go of the past. He brought her to his side and wrapped his arms around her knowing that she needed him to do so.

As their party entered the lift, her guardian commented. "What is that I smell?" Annie and her husband answered almost simultaneously, "Coffee, popcorn and chocolate."

Annie added as the doors to her past and the lift closed. "What else would you expect to smell in Grey 17?" She smiled and looked into her husband's eyes and allowed his gentle embrace to steady her as she left Zack and her friends for perhaps the last time.

ForeverCon

By Philip Giunta

“Another successful convention down.”

Jake Kanaan nodded his head in agreement as he and his friend, Nathan, perused the stacks of convention flyers laid out across the long wooden table. There were more than the usual number of flyers on this particular occasion, but not one advertised a convention Jake had not attended multiple times.

As he finished browsing the rows of flyers, he noticed one at the far corner of the table that advertised a convention he never heard of. “Nate,” Jake called to his friend standing at the other end of the table. “Hand me that flyer on the corner there.”

Nathan picked up the flyer Jake was pointing to and handed it to him, taking another for himself as well.

As far as advertisements went, this one was rather bland. There were no graphics, fancy letters or photos of guests. In fact, it was a simple one-sided, black and white flyer that read:

**Eternity Conventions
presents
ForeverCon - The Ultimate Trek**

Guest Speakers: TBA

Date and Time: TBA

Location: TBA

“Must be a new organization,” Nathan commented.

“Judging by this,” Jake replied, holding up the flyer. “I don’t quite see why they’re calling it ‘The Ultimate Trek.’”

“I guess they’re just getting the word out,” Nathan said. “Although they really should have waited until they provided more info before putting out a flyer.”

“They don’t even give a phone number to *call* for more info,” Jake observed, turning the flyer over and back. “How many are left over there?”

“None, it seems we got the last ones, but I think I’ll pass until I hear more about it.” Nathan put the flyer back onto the table before he and Jake turned to leave.

As the two departed the building and walked to the parking lot, they noticed the sky had filled with ominous gray clouds. Jake looked at his watch. It was seven o’clock. He was hoping to be out by six thirty to pick up his girlfriend.

“Tell her I said ‘hi’,” Nathan said. “And I’ll see you on the ‘Net. If you come across anything about that mystery con, e-mail me.”

The two shook hands and headed off in opposite directions.

What began as a light drizzle quickly turned into a torrential downpour. Jake found it more than a challenge just to drive. Reaching the top of the entrance ramp to the highway, he peered into his rearview mirror for an opportunity to merge with traffic. Through the deluge, he could barely make out several pair of headlights far behind him.

He hit the accelerator and his car shot out onto the highway—directly into the path of the tractor trailer whose driver lost control of the vehicle, causing it to jump directly into Jake's lane from oncoming traffic.

Jake turned a sharp right but it did no good. On the soaked surface his tires lost all traction and sent the car skidding directly into the path of the massive truck.

"I know this part of the convention can be boring, but I've never had anyone fall asleep on me."

"Hmm?" He heard a voice he didn't recognize. He opened his eyes. At first, he saw only darkness. Then he heard voices. Jake lifted his head from the table where he had apparently fallen asleep, his head resting in his arms.

Why am I so tired?

"Where am I?" he asked the man standing over him to his right.

"You're at the convention, of course!" the man replied gleefully.

Of course... What convention?

"The *Star Trek* convention," the man replied. "Where else?"

"But I just left the convention," Jake protested tiredly. He still was not sure he was fully awake.

"Nonsense! You just arrived," the man declared. "Welcome to ForeverCon!" The man spread his arms as if to encompass everything in sight.

ForeverCon... Where have I heard that before? And who is this wacko?

"I'm Peter, your host," the man answered, as if reading his mind. His tone suddenly lost its earlier cheerfulness.

How does he do that?

"It's simple, I'm reading your mind. Now do try and stay awake!"

Jake pulled himself up straight in his chair and looked around the room. Apparently, he was in some sort of cafeteria. There were about a dozen round tables spaced evenly throughout the room. He noticed other people milling about, some dressed in one or another *Star Trek* outfit. There were a handful of Klingons toward the back of the room seated around two tables conversing with three women dressed as Romulans. About a dozen Starfleet officers stood at the front of the room. Their various outfits covered every era of the Starfleet uniform from the original series to *Voyager*.

The feeling of fatigue began to dissipate and Jake pushed himself to his feet. He was suddenly reminded of his shoulder bag, the gray vinyl satchel he was carrying just a short while ago. He was about to ask Peter if he saw the bag, when he found it sitting on another chair to his

left.

That wasn't there a minute ago. I must be seriously tired, he thought as he snatched up the bag. "So is there a schedule for today? Who are the guests?"

"Well," Peter began. "Since time has no meaning here, a schedule would be rather pointless."

Jake didn't quite understand the meaning of that statement, but decided not to question it.

"As for the guests," Peter continued. "Our featured speaker is Gene Roddenberry."

Jake let out a surprised laugh. "I hate to tell you, Pete, but Gene passed away in 1991."

"So he did," Peter replied matter-of-factly.

Jake paused a moment before asking his next question. He was almost afraid to. "When is he scheduled to speak?"

"Using your idea of time, I believe he is due out sometime within the next century."

"The next century?!"

"Indeed! And I'd better hurry, I have to introduce him," Peter said as he turned to walk away. "Come on, Jake, I'll get you a good seat."

Jake closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. *This is NOT happening. This can NOT be real.*

"It *is* real," Peter called back. "Now would you please hurry before all the front row seats are taken!"

Jake inhaled deeply before rushing after the convention host. It didn't hit him until he saw Peter from a distance that the man was dressed in a white robe and sandals. At first, Jake thought the cheery convention host was going for the Vulcan look, but he was lacking the pointed ear prosthetics.

Jake finally shook his head and gave up trying to figure out what this guy was all about and just followed him to the entrance to what he presumed was the auditorium. Then a thought struck him, there was something he wasn't seeing at this convention.

"Hey, Pete," he called as he jogged to catch up. "Aren't there any dealers around here?"

"Oh no, not anymore," Peter began with a smile. "The Director's Son threw them all out. Apparently, their prices were so high, you had to sell your very soul to buy anything."

"Sounds like the dealers at just about every *Star Trek* convention," Jake said.

"Not like this," Peter stated firmly. He held up a hand and turned toward the door to the auditorium. "I have to go in and announce Gene. Why don't you follow me in and I'll put you in the front row."

"If you say so," Jake replied skeptically. He still could not shake the feeling that this was all a dream. This could not possibly be happening. Gene Roddenberry passed away on October 24, 1991. How could he be a guest at this convention?

This convention...

How did he get here, anyway? What day was it? Did he drive here?

Drive here...

He began to recall driving home from another convention. He remembered rain, and then...

His thoughts were interrupted as Peter ushered him to an aisle seat in the front row. Jake

noded his thanks to the host and sat down slowly. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable, a slight feeling of panic started to creep over him.

He looked around and for the first time saw just how large this room really was. There must be at least four thousand people here. He looked up in amazement at the second level balconies that surrounded the perimeter of the auditorium. It also dawned on him that he did not recognize even one face in the crowd. Surely, *someone* he knew had to be here.

A movement at the front of the room caught his attention. Peter walked out from the side of the enormous stage and stopped in the middle facing the audience. He clapped his hands to quiet the restless crowd. The sound was like thunder, silencing everyone immediately. As the sound faded, it took a moment for Jake to realize there was no microphone on the stage.

"Without further delay," the host began. "I would like to introduce to you, our beloved friend, Gene Roddenberry!"

Jake froze in his seat, his brain struggling to catch up with his eyes. Gene Roddenberry, looking no more than thirty five years old, walked out on stage and began waving to the applauding crowd.

Jake rose from his seat and slowly walked closer to the stage. *It can't be him, he's dead. It can't be...*

He looked over to the right and saw a small flight of steps leading up to the stage. He made his way over to the steps. He looked around to see if anyone noticed him. No one even seemed to be looking his way. As he stepped onto the stage, Jake wondered why security hadn't already bounced him out of there.

"There is no security here, Jake."

Jake turned to see Peter walking towards him from the right. "It's usually not necessary."

Jake adopted a determined look that barely masked the panic in his voice. "This is impossible! This can't be happening!"

"I assure you, Jake, it *is* happening just as you see it," Peter replied evenly.

Jake pointed to the man standing across the stage from them. "But he is dead!"

"So are you."

Speechless, Jake stared at Peter with an expression of astonishment.

"What is the last thing you remember before arriving here, Jake?" Peter asked.

Memories suddenly assaulted Jake's mind. Driving home in the rain...the highway...*the accident*. He closed his eyes as he saw the speeding tractor trailer rushing at him, out of control. He saw himself try in vain to escape...

"I can't believe it," he said quietly.

"You have to," said a voice from behind. Jake slowly turned his head to find Gene Roddenberry, The Great Bird of the Galaxy as he was fondly titled, standing beside him. As they shook hands, Gene pointed to Jake's carry bag. "You still have the flyer you picked up for this convention? You may want to take a look at it."

Jake quickly tore open the bag and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. He opened it and was about to ask Gene about it when he caught a glimpse of the bottom of the flyer. It read:

Eternity Conventions

presents

ForeverCon - The Ultimate Trek**Guest Speakers: Gene Roddenberry, *Star Trek*****Jon Pertwee, *Dr. Who*****Date and Time: Saturday November 4 at 7:10PM****Location: *Heaven***

Jake's eyes widened in shock. That was the exact day and time of the car accident. "Oh, my God!"

"Not so loud!" Peter warned. "It's not the Chairman's fault you ended up here."

The Chairman?

"You mean God runs this convention?!" Jake was clearly hysterical at this point.

"Who did you think, Creation? They're a couple of floors down," Gene said. "You know, you better relax."

Jake wasn't even listening, his brain had changed lanes and was now racing to keep up with his ears. "I didn't even know He was a *Star Trek* fan!"

"I should say He is! His favorite film was *Star Trek V*," Peter informed him.

"Really? What a surprise," Jake said. Then, his brain suddenly reached the finish line. "Look, fellas, I can't stay here. I have to go back!"

"Go back?" the convention host repeated in apparent disbelief. "You actually want to leave? But this is the Ultimate Trek!" Peter spread his arms, indicating the entire auditorium. "No one ever wants to leave!"

"Well, I do," Jake insisted. "I have so much I want to do with my life!"

"There's plenty to do up here, believe me," Gene declared. "Isaac Asimov's panel is coming up, then Jon Pertwee is going to talk. And you really have to stay for the grand finale, the Space Walk."

Jake looked at the two men in amazement, which was nothing new since he arrived here. "Don't tell me...you guys actually *take a walk* in space?" Jake asked.

"Jupiter is beautiful this time of year," Peter informed him. "You must join us."

Jake actually considered it for a moment but shook his head. *No, no, no! I have to get back!* His brain screamed.

"Very well, if you insist," Peter replied.

"I hate when he does that," Gene remarked. Apparently, Jake was not the only one slightly unnerved by the convention host's ability to read everyone's thoughts at will.

"Wait here, Jake, I'll see what I can do," Peter said.

"Thanks! Hey, you're a saint, Pete."

Peter smiled broadly. "So they tell me," he quipped before abruptly vanishing before their eyes.

"Neat trick," Jake observed.

"It's even better when he comes back," Gene replied with a smile. "So, Jake, I understand you've been to a lot of conventions in your time."

"Well, I guess," Jake paused a moment before continuing. "But I never did get the chance to see you in the flesh, before now." Jake immediately realized that 'in the flesh' may not have been the best choice of words considering their present location. "You know what I mean," he said sheepishly.

Gene laughed off Jake's embarrassment. "Right. So is there anything you wanted to ask now that you're here?"

Jake hesitated a moment before asking the one question that had been burning in his mind for years, a question posed by thousands of people, a question that had been the subject of extreme mystery and heated debate among *Star Trek* fans for years.

"Is Bill Shatner's hair really a weave or just a rug?"

Moments later, Peter reappeared on the stage. Instead of a sudden return, however, he emerged in a bright yellow transporter beam.

"See? Told ya," Gene said to Jake.

"I love doing that," Peter said as the beam faded. "Quite an appropriate touch, don't you think?"

"Lovely," Jake replied. His tone indicated the suspense was unnerving him. "Now what's going on? Can I go back?"

"I spoke to the Big Three," Peter began as his eyes lifted skyward. "And they unanimously agreed to honor your request."

"Alleluia! So when do I go back?"

"Well, it's not just a matter of *when* you go back. It is also a question of *where*. I certainly do not want to send you back to your car at the moment. That would be rather inconvenient for you."

"You have a gift for understatement."

Peter ignored the comment. He raised his hand suddenly. His face lit up as he spoke, "I have an idea. Are you ready?"

Jake adopted a suspicious look. "What *exactly* is your idea?"

"Don't worry," Peter answered in that typical merry tone. "Trust me, you'll love it!"

"Come on, Pete, you're killing me!"

"Quite the contrary, Jake!" Peter said.

"You can't get any more dead than you are now, believe me," Roddenberry said, grinning.

Jake turned to Gene. "You know, we all do miss you down there," he said.

"Thanks, I appreciate that," Gene replied. "They let me keep an eye on the happenings down there. Suffice it to say that I'm glad I died *before* Generations."

Jake smiled as he shook Gene's hand for the final time. As he did so, the true meaning of the events he experienced here struck him. It became a solemn moment between the two.

There was an awkward silence that seemed to last an eternity.

"Hey, Jake, take care," Gene said. "Just think, now you can tell all your friends you've been to the true Final Frontier."

"Indeed," Peter said. "All right, Jake, here you go!"

Peter snapped his fingers. Immediately, Jake was enveloped in a bright red beam of light which began to separate in the middle and part outwards. In seconds, Jake was gone.

Not bad, Gene thought.

"Q has nothing over me," Peter replied with a grin.

"I hate when you do that."

"Another successful convention down."

Jake Kanaan nodded his head in agreement as he and his friend, Nathan, perused the stacks of convention flyers laid out across the long wooden table. There were more than the usual number of flyers on this particular occasion, but not one advertised a convention Jake had not attended multiple times.

As he finished browsing the rows of flyers, he noticed one at the far corner of the table that advertised a convention he never heard of. "Nate," Jake called to his friend standing at the other end of the table. "Hand me that flyer on the corner there."

Nathan picked up the flyer Jake was pointing to and handed it to him, taking another for himself as well.

As far as advertisements went, this one was rather bland. There were no graphics, fancy letters or photos of guests. In fact, it was a simple one-sided, black and white flyer that read:

**Eternity Conventions
presents
ForeverCon - The Ultimate Trek**

Guest Speakers: TBA

Date and Time: TBA

Location: TBA

"Must be a new organization," Nathan commented.

"No, I've been to one of their conventions before," Jake replied. "I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why, too boring?" Nathan asked.

"Not at all," Jake answered with a small grin. "Just too expensive."

Author's Introduction - This story began on fine day, many years ago when my best friend and I started doing some "well, what if" musings. We had always been intrigued with the unseen character of Joanna McCoy and started wondering about her. Who was she? What was she like? Up until that time, no one had ever done anything with her. (You must understand, we started this in the mid-1970's; "Crisis at Centaurus" had, most probably, not even been thought of then, nor had "Shadows on the Sun.") We decided we would try to write a story about her. Well, as I went on with writing this, one thing led to another and I got the brilliant idea to do a whole series of Joanna stories. This is actually the third in the series. It just so happens it is the one that got finished first. I realize that all of you may not agree with my interpretations. That's fine. I have no problem with that. I'm sure I don't agree with all of yours. It is, after all, the basis for IDIC. I only ask that you read this story for the entertainment value it was written for. Enjoy it. Have fun with it. That's all it was written for. It is not the "definitive" work about Joanna McCoy. Contrary to what many people wish us to believe, there are other interpretations of these characters around.

This story takes place during the third year of the second five year mission, according to the Okuda timeline. Joanna McCoy has been in and resigned from Starfleet. She is now a highly respected Chief of Surgery at a Federation teaching hospital on a planet called Ystis. She is, however, not happy and keeps looking for adventure, the adrenaline rush she is so addicted to (her assignments in Starfleet were all on Border Patrol ships). Hence, the situation of this story.

There are also, a few people I need to thank. First and foremost, Bev Volker, a writer and editor whom I have admired for years. She very kindly agreed to edit this story and has helped me become a better, more focused, writer. I am very grateful for her time and suggestions. Next, Steve Wilson and Farpoint for giving me the opportunity of having this story published. Next, to Howard Weinstein, A.C. Crispin, J.M. Dillard, and all the other early Star Trek authors for their contributions and giving me a belief that I, too, could put my ideas on paper. Lastly, to Jean Lorrah. Her "Night of Twin Moons" was the first Star Trek story I ever read and I feel in love with the wonderfully gently way she told this marvelous tale. I hope I have been able to emulate her a little.

I would like to dedicate this story to my friend and co-author, Dorothy Bermudez. We have lost touch a few years ago. I miss her wonderfully dry sarcasm and interesting view of the Star Trek universe. Dottie, if you happen to get a copy of this, I hope you like our story. I did my best without you.

STAR TREK

Legends

By J. Green and D. Bermudez

"When Living Legends meet, there's usually a fracas goin' on ..."

Hettie McCoy, Great Grandmother of Leonard McCoy

Three figures solidified from the shimmering light as the desert breeze blew in from the open sands. Below them, the city lay shimmering in a light of its own; multi-colored tents lined broad streets as voices mingled with laughter and music. The scent of desert blossoms filled the air with perfume. It was a time of awakening. The dormancy of winter giving way to the new life of the spring. It was a time of rejoicing.

Kirk looked down at the city. It seemed of another time, another place. He had imagined a city like this at the desert oases of ancient Terra. He regretted he would not be able to enjoy the diversions that would be offered in a city such as this. He could almost savor the wines and the sweet fruits that would delight more than one palate.

The breeze stirred again, bringing him out of his reverie as the robes he wore swirled. The three men had dressed this way to better blend in with the inhabitants of Farouk Tau. Looking at his companions, he nodded. The Vulcan took the lead, carefully picking the easiest route down the rubble strewn trail with his superior night vision. McCoy went second. Should, for any number of reasons, they be attacked, McCoy would be the most vulnerable. The good Doctor was not what could be called a proficient combatant. Kirk brought up the rear. He thought it would be safest this way. He was wrong.

"Shit!"

McCoy and Spock turned at the low curse.

"Jim?"

"Stepped in a hole. I'll be all right. Just twisted my ankle."

"Let me see!" McCoy muttered, pulling his scanner from his kit. "Gonna be more than a few minutes, Jim boy. You got yourself one dandy compound fracture."

"Patch me up enough to get into the city."

"I need to get you back to *Enterprise*. This has to be taken care of now, not later."

"We have a mission to take care of now, Doctor!"

McCoy shook his head. "You'd think that by now we'd learn to simply say 'No thank you, sir' when those blasted desk jockey's send us on a 'routine' mission. Did y'all ever notice how these routine missions rapidly deteriorate into routine disasters?"

"I shall scout ahead and find an easier way down," Spock told Kirk.

"Go ahead."

"Oh, and while you're at it, bring us back something nice and cold to drink," McCoy added. "I'm thirsty."

Spock raised his eyebrow, knowing the Doctor to be rapidly lapsing into an uncooperative mood. "Doctor, the probability of finding a cool beverage on this hillside is ..."

"Never mind," McCoy growled. He stooped to administer pain medication and anti-inflammation drugs to Kirk's ankle.

Spock nodded minutely to Kirk, then vanished into the night.

Kirk inhaled sharply as McCoy's probing fingers hit the exposed bone tissue. Seconds later, the flexcast was in place.

"Try it," McCoy prompted.

Kirk put weight on the foot, expecting pain to shoot up his leg. Instead, he felt only an ache. "Feels great, Bones.

"It won't once those drugs wear off. But, there's no use arguing with you. Just take it slow and easy. No running, jumping or other acrobatics."

"Promise," Kirk swore.

Voices and dull thuds broke the silence. The sounds came from further down the hill, from the direction Spock took. "Damn! Come on, Bones!"

"Jim, wait a minute ..."

"Spock doesn't have a minute!" Kirk dashed past McCoy, heedless of his injury, or the promise he had just made. McCoy followed, muttering.

By the time the two men reached the spot, the persons belonging to the voices were gone. There was no sign of Spock. Kirk leaned heavily on a rock. The pain was screaming through his leg. Sweat, from pain and exertion, ran down his white face. Taking a step, his leg gave way beneath him. McCoy grabbed frantically at Kirk as he tumbled toward the rocky trail. McCoy heard the sickening crunch of flesh and bone against rock.

"Dammit, Jim, why don't you ever listen to me!" He stooped and ran his tricorder across the inert form, mouth tightening as he read the output. "McCoy to *Enterprise* ..."

"*Enterprise*, Scott here."

"Medical emergency, Mr. Scott. Two to beam directly to Sickbay. Tell Dr. Chapel I'll need her assistance and to have a nurse prepare OR suite 2 and I will need a skull kit."

"Transporter Chief Rand ..."

"Aye sir. Energizing," Rand's voice informed.

A second later, the shimmer of the transporter beam enveloped them.

McCoy and Kirk materialized in the Sickbay. As soon as their forms solidified, a gurney was next to them. "On three ..." McCoy said as five other personnel gathered around the inert captain. When McCoy called three, the six people hoisted Kirk on to the gurney and headed for the OR suite.

"Skull fracture over the left parietal, beginning just behind the left eyes."

"Everything is ready," Chapel confirmed as they entered the OR.

Spock looked at the brightly colored tents as the escort of soldiers marched him into the garrison area. Ahead of him, a group of men sat around a fire. Coarse laughter erupted at a shared joke as a bottle passed between them. Firelight cast deep shadows between the tents

behind the men. The scent of flowers mingled with the scent of cooking food. As they neared the fire, Spock noticed garlands of flowers draped over the openings of the tents.

The laughter abruptly stopped as the small party approached the group. A burly man rose from the far side and walked over. "What have we here?"

"Intruder. Found him on the cliff path."

"I was attempting to inform your men ..." Spock started only to be silenced by a blow to his midsection. The Vulcan doubled over slightly, then straightened, looking at his assailant. The soldier stared back, surprised by the Vulcan's quick recovery.

"I'm Kreeg. I command this unit. What were you doing on the cliff paths?"

Spock took a deeper than normal breath. "I became separated from my companions and lost my way."

Kreeg looked inquiringly at the soldiers who had brought Spock in.

"There was no one else there. We searched the entire area after we found him."

"Davin?" Kreeg asked a man standing behind Spock.

"Nothing. There wasn't anyone else up there. Nel and I went all the way to the ruins."

Kreeg nodded slowly. "Jesl, notify Commander Karn that we found a runaway slave." A young soldier nodded, then headed between the tents.

"I am no one's slave."

"Something as pretty as you?" Kreeg snorted. "Some lady probably misses you warming her bed."

"I assure you that is not the case," Spock told him.

"No? Not a lady. Hmm. Must be a man, then. Your master's going to be very unhappy when he finds you're not waiting for him. Perhaps there'll be a handsome reward for your return."

"I tell you I belong to no one."

"Well," Kreeg drawled. "That sheds a whole different light on the matter. Doesn't it boys." Murmurs rose around them. Spock could hear various comments being passed between the watching men. Kreeg circled the Vulcan slowly, examining Spock as if he were a piece of livestock. "Nice structure. Looks healthy, if a bit thin. From the looks of things, I'd say you've had a pretty comfortable life, wherever you're from."

Spock's eyebrow rose slowly as he listened to Kreeg. Had he just been insulted? Or was it approval? And approval for what? Spock wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

"Bring him to the fire." The burly soldier returned to the fire followed by Spock and his captors.

Spock looked at the faces around him. Hard faces looked back at him with curiosity and anticipation as the burly soldier turned back to survey the captive.

"Come join us. We all would enjoy your company."

"I must find my companions."

"We insist!"

"I must decline your ... gracious invitation," Spock replied edging toward a gap in the circle. Without warning, he found himself sprawled in the dirt, the circle of men closing in around him. A booted foot impacted with his side as he tried to stand. Kicks and blows came from all directions. Spock pulled himself into a tight ball, covering his head with his arms. Vulcan control

held rigid as the pummeling continued, blocking all pain.

The soldiers stopped as they realized their victim was unresponsive to their treatment. There was no whimper, no groan, no pleas to stop. There was only silence. Their entertainment just wasn't cooperating.

"Haven't you bunch of rimaks learned yet?" a sarcastic drawl interrupted the discontented murmurs. "Brute force doesn't work for everything. Some things have to be finessed." The speaker made his way through the crowd, drawing a white handled knife as he came.

Grins appeared on the faces surrounding Spock. At a gesture from the man, two soldiers pried the Vulcan's arms from his head and pinned them to the ground. Four men grabbed his legs, sitting on them to keep Spock motionless.

"Let's see how he likes this," the man with the knife grinned.

"Make those fancy swirls, like you did on the last one, Tarl."

Tarl grinned as he looked at Spock. "Maybe I'll start with those pretty ears. Just cut them off slowly. Don't want to ruin them."

"What you gonna do with 'em Tarl? Give 'em to that dancer you've been trying to impress?"

"I thought I'd keep these for myself. Maybe hang 'em on my belt for luck. They're too good for a dancer. Only one thing a dancer's good for boys." The men laughed as Tarl bent to make the first cut.

"Not yet." Kreeg's hand gripped Tarl's forearm. "Save those for last. Besides, he just might belong to someone. He could have been lying to us."

Tarl regarded Kreeg for a moment, then nodded. With one movement, he slashed the front of Spock's robes. The blade sliced through the material with ease. The breeze caught the edges and Spock shivered in the sudden coolness. Murmurs of approval swelled as the men shifted for a better view of the proceedings.

Spock felt the metal touch his skin at the base of his throat. There was a prick as the blade punctured his skin. He watched in fascination as the knife proceeded downward, toward his abdomen. A thin line of green appeared as the edge passed through his skin. The cut was neither deep nor wide. Done with the precision of a surgeon, it reminded him of McCoy's surity with the scalpel. The knife lifted as it reached its destination of his lower abdomen. A second later, it was cutting across from left to right, quartering his torso.

The Vulcan watched as Tarl glanced at his knife. Tarl ran his finger along the side, wiping some of the green liquid from the blade, regarding the color for a second. Spock then saw a slight lift of shoulders as the wielder of the metal bent to his work once again.

"Looks like finesse doesn't work either," a voice from the crowd jeered.

Tarl turned, glaring in the direction of the heckler. "We could always see how well you do?" Turning back to the Vulcan, he thrust the blade downward.

Spock sensed the metal pierce his skin. It was deeper this time. The touch wasn't as subtle. Now there was a savagery behind the action. Now there was more to it than amusement. The knife moved in a circular motion. When it left his body, Spock saw a corkscrew pattern on his left hip.

Again the blade descended. Spock's right side was its target this time. Close to the heart

now. Dangerously close, and moving closer. The pattern was a zig zag this time, moving upward.

"Enough!" The command brought a halt to all movement. The soldiers froze in place. "Tarl, put your toy away." The voice was a silky baritone with a hint of steel that would tolerate no questions. Obedience was instantaneous.

Spock saw a man of moderate height enter the circle. He was dressed in a highly ornamented robe that seemed oddly out of place in the dusty yard.

"My Lord," Kreeg bowed as the man stopped by Spock.

"What have you learned?"

"Nothing, my Lord. This one does not ... react as the others. We could not persuade him to speak."

"I see. And he claims to belong where?"

"He would not say."

"Odd that a creature this exquisite should be allowed to run free. Bring him!"

Two men emerged from behind the speaker. Bending down, they grabbed the Vulcan's arms and hauled him to his feet. The remnants of the robe slid from his shoulders. Spock tried to grab the material as it slid from his body, but found he was hampered by the men gripping his arms.

"What's the problem?" Sulu asked as he walked on to the bridge. Scotty had summoned *Enterprise's* First Officer after the call from McCoy

"Dr. McCoy has the Captain in surgery right now. I'm afraid it's bad."

Sulu frowned. "Did he say how bad?"

"No. I got a quick report from him before they started surgery; it seems Mr. Spock was captured. I've already initiated a scan to find him, but the Teronian physiology and the Vulcan physiology are remarkably similar. It's gon' ta be difficult. I'm trying to tune the sensors a wee bit better. I canna promise ..."

"I know." Sulu sighed. "Very well." He moved to the con and slid into the chair. He knew he would have nights like this as First Officer of the *Enterprise*. "I'm sure Dr. McCoy will have something to say about routine missions going astray."

"Aye," Scotty sighed as he stood next to the chair. "Seems ta me, the good Doctor may be on to something. Every time someone tells us tha' a mission's gon' ta be a cakewalk, I start ta worry."

"Never fails. The easier they say it's going to go, the worse it usually is. Murphy's Law of missions." He glanced at the chronometer. "2100 ... It's going to be a long night."

"Aye. You knew tha' these were in the package when Will Decker made ya First Officer..."

Sulu smiled. "I did at that, my friend." He pushed the com button, "Security Chief Chekov to the Bridge."

"Expectin' trouble?"

"Contingencies. I want to be prepared in case we have to go down to the planet and do a rescue. You know, white horses and all that."

"I'll have the lads start workin' on refining the schematics in the tricorders to filter out those Teronian life signs."

Sulu nodded, his thoughts having moved to the planet on the view screen. Farouk Tau was the governmental center of the Teronian Empire, a group of planets in the proximity of Ceta Teron VI. It was documented in their history that the descendants lived on the second planet of the orange star until a shift of the axis caused massive geological upheavals and weather distortions. Farouk Tau was the first planet that the refugees came to that was the closest match to their original home. There was some speculation that the Teronians could possibly be an offshoot of a Romulan splinter group.

"Lt. Commander Chekov reporting, sir."

Sulu smiled involuntarily at his friend's formality. "Mr. Chekov, I need you to prepare an away team of your best and brightest. Mr. Spock has been taken captive and it seems the Teronian physiology and Vulcan physiology are remarkably similar. Mr. Scott tells me he's having a hard time pinpointing Mr. Spock's readings with that kind of interference.

"Very good, sir. How large do you want this group?"

"Three. Fully and completely briefed."

"Aye, sir." Chekov turned on his heel and headed for the lift.

Scotty watched him, then turned to Sulu, "Takes things a wee bit too seriously, if you ask me."

"Always has," Sulu responded. "But, it's one of his strengths. Gives him tremendous concentration skills and attention to detail. That's why he's such a good security chief."

Scotty nodded, then turned back to the tricorder problem. Sulu returned his gaze to the planet.

Joanna McCoy gazed up at the night sky. Stars danced in the black sky above her head. Stars that she had watched streaking past the windows of a ship. She could still name them. Targa Vegus, Siranus, Nes Toral, Pinniok. Pinniok. It was there her former life had ended. It had taken time for her to get use to life without Starfleet. She knew she would miss it until the end of her days. Miss the adrenaline rush, the excitement. Her father said she was never happy with being safe and secure; she always had to go out on that edge, take that extra risk that no one else dared to take. He could never figure out where she had gotten it from. She smiled as she thought about him. She missed him, too.

Joanna was glad their relationship had been mended, that they were now on a good, firm foundation. No, he couldn't give her back the years or the birthdays, or anything else that the two had missed sharing, but he could give her his love and friendship now. She was glad, too, he had his friends on *Enterprise*. The Three Musketeers she called them. She could only hope that his friends would not be taken the way hers had been.

"You're thoughtful tonight."

"Just star gazing," Joanna returned as she accepted the drink that materialized in front of her. "Where've you been?"

"Checking on a rumor I heard at the keep." Sobutai Takara sat down next to her. His

handsome face and athletically lean body as limber as ever as he crossed his legs. His Mongol heritage showed in his features. His moustache and beard added to the look.

"So the Takara trading empire now concerns itself with rumors," she grinned.

"When they concern a Vulcan that was found on the path from the ruins they do," he told her, certain she'd pick up on the reference.

"Vulcan ... It can't be ..."

"I'd lay money on it. What other Vulcan do you know that would possibly come in from the cliffs. All the rest of them would come in the usual ways, through the port. Besides, what better way to sneak in and escape detection. Only something went wrong. This Vulcan was captured and tortured. Don't be surprised if you get a call from the keep." Sobutai sipped his drink. "My guess is the Teronian healers will know enough, but not enough, if you catch my meaning."

"Similar, yet different enough. If it is Spock ..."

"No names ... You know the breeze has ears here."

"Sorry. I'll remember to be more circumspect. I suppose it would be bad form to let on that I know him ..."

"Especially since what we need to find out for the Fed hinges on how well you can entice Turin with your charms, my dear."

"Are we still doing the lover routine?"

"Have to. No way to stop it now."

Joanna swallowed the rest of her drink, feeling the burn of the simbu as it landed in her stomach. "Next time you ask me to do you a favor, make sure there are no starships in the area, ok?"

"Especially ones that begin with E," Sobutai grinned.

"Yeah," Joanna said quietly. She was getting one of those feelings that things were about to go a little crazy.

Sulu glared at the planet on the viewscreen, an innocent green/brown blot in the star studded black. Spock was somewhere on that planet. Precious time was being lost.

"Mr. Sulu," Uhura's voice interrupted his thoughts. She had been on the bridge when the McCoy talked to Scotty doing one of her frequent upgrades to the system. She decided to stay to help with the search.

"Yes." Sulu turned toward her. He did not like the look on her face. It was a mixture of annoyance and concern.

"We've picked up a distress call from a freighter in Targa sector, sir. From the sounds of things it's very serious.

"Other available ships?"

"None, sir."

The words sounded hollow in Sulu's ears. He congratulated himself mentally for keeping his face completely devoid of any expression, except for a minor tightening of his jaw. "Divert to Targa sector, all possible speed," he ordered the helm. "Commander Uhura, please send the

coordinates to navigation. Let Mr. Chekov know his team is to beam down now." Turning around, he sighed; there was no other alternative. The distress call was a priority issue.

"Aye, sir," three voices responded simultaneously.

Sulu pressed the comm button trying not to give in to the urge to punch it. "Bridge to Sickbay."

"Sickbay, Dr. W'lache here."

"This is Commaner Sulu; has Dr. McCoy finished in surgery?"

"Not yet. I believe they may be finished in another half hour."

"Very well. Please inform him we have a priority distress call in Targa sector. We are moving there with all possible speed. You will need to prepare for casualties. As soon as I get further details I'll let him know."

"Very well, sir. Shall I ask him to call you when he is finished?"

"Yes. Sulu out."

Spock stared at the ceiling of the room. It was a shade of deep blue, the color of the ocean on Cerran Vista. Curious he should think of that now. Kirk and McCoy had persuaded him to go on shore leave with them. It was one time he was glad he had relented. A marvelous planet with myriads of interesting life forms and terrains.

"He will be fine, as near as I can tell, My Lord." The healer's voice broke into his thoughts. "His heartbeat is strong. He doesn't seem to be suffering any discomfort." The man shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Of course, I'm unfamiliar with this particular species. Still, rest wouldn't hurt. And some food."

"Trel, bring food for our guest!" The owner of the voice moved next to the cot. Green eyes travelled over the Vulcan's body. "Still saying nothing, mysterious one."

Spock's eyes turned in his direction.

"You could at least tell me your name."

"I am Spock."

"Spock. Let me welcome you to my keep, Spock. Rest well tonight. Tomorrow, we must talk more." The man turned as a smaller man entered the room. A tray of fruit, cheese and a pitcher of drink was placed on a small table not far from the cot. "Enjoy your meal. Oh, and don't try to leave. My soldiers will kill you this time."

The ornamented robes swirled as the man turned and left the room, others trailing in his wake.

Spock looked at the food. It looked delicious, but he simply stared back at the ceiling and initiated a light healing trance. He needed to find a way out of this place. For some reason the surroundings "made his skin crawl", as McCoy would say.

The freighter hung, lifeless, against the star dotted blackness. It looked so innocent, so inoffensive. It had taken twelve hours for the *Enterprise* to reach the freighter. Twelve hours

away from Farouk Tau. Away from Spock.

Sulu stared at it dispassionately. "Bring her into the hanger deck, Mr. Oros."

"Aye, sir." The Andoran's fingers danced across the console. "Tractor beam attached. Hanger deck has been notified."

"Very good. Commander Uhura, let Dr. McCoy know his new guests are here.."

"Medical team notified, sir. Dr. McCoy standing by."

A short time later the freighter rested in the hanger deck. Sulu waited for word from Scotty that all was secure. Finally, word came. Insantly the *Enterprise* was on its way back to Farouk Tau.

"I'll be in Sickbay. Mr. Oros, you have the conn," Sulu said as he stood up. It had been a long twelve hours.

The doors to Sickbay opened as Sulu entered. He looked around at the controlled pandemonium that marked the scene. It always amazed him as he watched the intricate ballet that the medical staff performed in rescue situations. Everyone doing their tasks, interweaving in a life saving tapestry that left him slightly awestruck.

McCoy spotted him and signalled to him. "IV blood detox. Let's get these contaminants out of this one," McCoy finished as Sulu approached. The nurse nodded and took the chart from him as he moved to meet Sulu.

"How bad?"

"Exposure to too many of the system gasses. Lot of toxic build up in the blood streams, but nothing that can't be fixed."

"How's the captain doing?"

"Still in a coma. That rock did a lot of damage. It's going to take time for the cranial swelling to go down. It's not life threatening ..." McCoy hasitily reassured Sulu. "The body has different coping mechanisms, this is just one. You have to remember that a traumatic injury like this causes massive amounts of white blood cells and fluids to accumulate in and around the injured area. Because of the surgery and the invasion of bone fragments, the body still thinks it has to defend agains this injury. Give it another 24 hours. He'll be up and complain' about getting back to the bridge."

Sulu nodded. "I've ordered course change back to Farouk Tau. Mr. Chekov and his men should be ensconced somewhere in the city by now. I hope they've found something."

McCoy nodded, his face showing his concern. "The sooner we find him and get him out, the better I'll feel."

"Same here." Sulu allowed himself a rare sigh. "I'm going to go to the gym and work out."

"And when was the last time you slept?" McCoy asked eyeing him critically.

Sulu grinned, "Oh, about 24 hours ago."

"Get some rest," McCoy ordered.

"After I work out. Promise."

"I'll be checking on you!"

"Hounding will be more like it," Sulu laughed. "Really, I promise, Doctor. I'll need to be

on top of my game if we run into trouble with Mr. Spock.”

McCoy nodded his agreement and his approval. Sulu was going to make one fine starship commander someday, he thought.

“See ya later, Doc,” Sulu grinned, knowing how much McCoy hated to be called ‘Doc’. Turning before McCoy could say anything he started out the door.

“And don’t call me ‘Doc’!” McCoy called at the retreating back.

Sulu was satisfied for the moment. The damaged freighter was secured in *Enterprise's* hanger deck. Scotty and his teams were effecting the necessary repairs. McCoy had the small crew firmly entrenched in Sickbay recuperating from their ill-timed systems failure. Everything was quiet, almost status quo. Almost.

His thoughts turned to Spock. The freighter's misfortunes had delayed the Vulcan's rescue by 24 hours. *Enterprise* was now on her way back, but was not running at as high a warp as she had on the way out. The engines were badly in need of refit. Because of that it would take several hours longer to reach Farouk Tau. Sulu chaffed at the delay, at the limit of the machinery. Scotty had his people working to eke out every last bit of warp without putting *Enterprise* in danger. Still, somehow, Sulu felt it wasn’t enough. He felt Spock was on very dangerous ground.

The blue haze wavered through the window of the rec room. They had arrived at the Quanaar just as the solstice took place. It was a rare and beautiful sight that few ship's crews were lucky enough to see.

Red alert klaxxons broke the silent reverie. Three Klingon Birds of Prey materialized, blocking out the twin stars.

“Joanna! Wake up!”

She sat up, taking a deep, shuddering breath as the images faded. Automatically, she grabbed onto the arms that steadied her.

“Here, drink this.” He held a cup to her lips and she drank the cool juice.

“Thanks, Sobutai.”

“The dreams seem to be getting worse.”

“Yeah.”

Sobutai sighed as he set the empty cup on a table. He had been through this with her before. He hoped that each time would be the last. But the dreams kept coming. Every night Joanna McCoy relived the nightmare of Pinniok over and over. He scrubbed his face with his hand trying to wipe away the last vestiges of his disturbed sleep. “By the way, Turin sent a message last night. He's invited you to breakfast. Says he has something he wants you to see.”

“Really. How interesting,” she mumbled as she sank against the pillows. “I wonder if it’s our elusive Vulcan.” The sun was fully over the horizon as she looked out the window of the tent. “Well, I suppose I'd better get up and dressed. Best not to keep our host waiting.”

He woke slowly, forcing his way out of the light healing trance. He noted the coppery taste in his mouth as he became aware of his surroundings. Gradually, he realized he was not

alone. Raising himself to a sitting position, he faced the man who had removed him from the circle of soldiers. He made a frantic grab for the thin coverlet as his movement sent it cascading to the floor.

"You must forgive my men for your welcome, but they do not like strangers who arrive in the dark by little used paths. Perhaps you would care to enlighten me as to how that happened." The man leaned idly against a wall, eyes languidly roaming across the Vulcan's form.

Spock studied the man. He was of average build, well muscled from physical activity. Turin was about Spock's height, his hair almost white from being out in the orange desert sun, his eyes a piercing green and skin the color of dark gold/bronze. The second most noticeable feature was his ears, curved in an outward flare, almost cupped. Spock noted the structure was similar to his own and briefly recalled the rumored splinter group from the Romulans that is mentioned in the Vulcan histories. There was an air of arrogance surrounding him as he posed languidly, his desert robes of ocher draped around his body. "As I explained to your soldiers last night, I became separated from my companions and was merely attempting to make my way back into the city."

A slow smile curved the man's mouth. "You are an incredibly inept liar. Did you really think we would not check your story out? My men can find no registry of you or your elusive companions anywhere in Shnarr."

"None-the-less, it is the truth."

"I believe the truth is you have run away from your rightful owner."

"I am no one's property."

"So you state. However, I am sure it is only a matter of time until we find out where you belong. And until that time, you will remain here, in custody of the State."

"And should I choose not to?"

"Then you will die."

"By whose order?"

"Mine, of course."

"And may I know the name of my executioner?"

"Turin, Lord Chancellor of the Teronian Empire." The man made a slight, mocking bow toward the Vulcan. "Now, my servant shall bring you breakfast. I suggest you eat it. Trel was quite insulted that you did not dine last evening. He had gone to great trouble to make the meal appealing. And when Trel is upset, he makes the rest of my household miserable."

"Indeed." Spock's eyebrow raised slightly. He was reminded sharply of McCoy and wondered where the *Enterprise* was. "I shall endeavor not to offend him."

"Good."

Joanna squinted in the bright sunlight. Sobutai had not seemed pleased about the invitation. She felt a little guilty about it. She had promised to have breakfast with him since she had broken their dinner plans the night before to have dinner with their prey. Until Turin had been called away, that was. But the guilt evaporated quickly in the warm, morning light. Turin intrigued her. Something drew her to him like a moth to a flame. She shook her head as she thought about it. She had always been attracted to dangerous or enigmatic men. The adrenalin

rush again. Despite herself she was curious about what he had to show her.

Spock sighed as he looked at the tray of food in front of him. It was an assortment of fruits and vegetables. A pitcher of light blue liquid sat in the corner. Filling the cup, he drank it. The flavor reminded him of strawberries. Picking up a green plum-like fruit, he examined it, then bit into it. The taste was pleasant.

Why had Kirk and McCoy not returned for him? Perhaps the Kirk's injury had delayed their return. Or perhaps there was a problem on the ship itself. Scotty had been doing a bit of "creative engineering" and they were past due for refit. His musings were interrupted by Trel's approach. "Lord Turin requests your presence."

"Indeed."

"He does not like to be kept waiting."

"Very well."

Standing, Spock draped the coverlet around him and started for the doorway. He was stopped by Trel's hand on his shoulder.

"Leave that here." The servant grabbed the material and pulled it away from the Vulcan.

Spock looked at Trel, then took a deep breath, as if gathering his patience. With a nod, Spock followed him into a larger room. His nakedness was ... disconcerting, embarrassing and unfortunately, for the moment, out of his control. He had sensed a lethal menace in his captor. Turin would, indeed do as he had threatened. If he did not go along, he would be dead before he could find out why he had not been rescued. Self-consciously he followed Trel.

"He is here, my Lord."

"Thank you Trel. Our guest has arrived. Will you see to the meal?"

Trel bowed low, then left the room.

Spock stared stonily ahead. He was not anxious to be subjected to the whims of Turin. Perhaps he could stall until his rescue arrived. *If* his rescue arrived. There was always the possibility of a sensor malfunction. The odds of that occurring had increased with *Enterprise's* need of refit.

Turin stood in front of the Vulcan. Reaching out, he stroked Spock's cheek. Spock turned his head away, breaking the contact. Instantly, Turin's fingers twined in Spock's hair, forcing the Vulcan to look at him. "You forget yourself, Spock! You are mine to touch where and when I please! Understand me well when I say you shall do as I command! You will obey me! I demand obedience. Instant obedience, without question or resistance to whatever I order!" Turin grinned mockingly at the look of annoyance that flashed across Spock's face. "It will do no good to resist, Spock. Why make it difficult on yourself? Do you understand me?"

Spock stared at Turin, saying nothing. A rustling of material caught his attention. Turning he saw a beautiful woman dressed in the casual fashion of the planet enter through a different doorway, followed by the guard. He released the Vulcan and moved to her.

"Welcome, my dear," Turin murmured as he placed a light kiss on her lips. "I want to show you my latest acquisition. The soldiers found him on the cliff path last night. He aroused my ... curiosity. I have decided to train him as my personal slave. He will not only attend to my needs during the day, but the night as well. I would much prefer to spend the nights with you, but

since you continue to refuse my invitations, I must make do with others.” Turin pouted slightly for effect. “Should you ever decide to accept, he can sleep on the floor.” Turin grinned charmingly at Joanna.

Laughing, she turned for her first good look at the man standing across the room. The shock of recognition was instantaneous.

Spock! Oh Gods, I was right. This is a big problem. Don't recognize me. Please. I can't believe it. He must be absolutely mortified.

Joanna! What is she doing here with this man? Unconsciously, Spock looked around for something to cover himself with.

“He is indeed a prize,” Joanna smiled, covering her surprise. “But, I think I'm jealous, Lord Turin.”

“I shall not ignore you, my beautiful lady. I swear I shall devote what spare time I have between you equally.”

The implications of Turin's words hit Spock like a thunderclap. A ‘personal’ slave. Very much more than a valet. The Vulcan felt an unaccustomed heat rising in his cheeks. The feeling intensified as he saw Turin studying his naked form. His discomfort became unbearable under the scrutiny. He reached for a covering that had been draped across a chair.

The Teronian crossed the room, with a speed that surprised Spock, and grabbed him. Spock felt the vise-like grip between his legs and froze in place, revulsion and an intense discomfort sweeping through him before he could regain control. In that grip, he was powerless to move ... and knew it!

“I did not give you permission to cover yourself!” Turin drawled menacingly. “Know this! You are mine. I own you body and soul. Every whim, every wish, every desire of mine is yours to fulfill and obey. Your life will be lived on my terms, or not at all.

“Lord Turin, I am Vulcan,” Spock informed him. “If I understand your meaning correctly, I must inform you that I am incapable of responding as you desire. It will only lead to your disappointment if you attempt to pursue this course of action.”

“It matters not whether you're from Vulcan or Hawtor's Pit. You *will* obey me!. Instantly and without question!” Turin's green eyes locked with the Vulcan's brown ones.

Joanna watched the scene in front of her with a sinking feeling. *In the name of everything you hold sacred, Spock, agree!* Joanna held her breath. The tension in the room was palpable.

“Your orders, my Lord?” Spock lowered his eyes and made a slight bow. The decision had been made. He would play this ‘game’ for the time being. Kirk and *Enterprise* would soon come to his rescue.

Joanna suddenly felt the need to sit down. She moved gracefully to the table and sank into the brightly embroidered chair as she felt her knees buckle. *Thank the gods he has some sense. I could just see explaining to my father why the First Officer of the Enterprise was killed. Well, you see Dad, he didn't want to be Turin's personal sex toy. He found it objectionable, so Turin had him beheaded. Gods!* She looked up and smiled as Turin joined her.

“It will take some training to break his willfulness, but he will make an excellent slave.”

“However,” she paused smiling hesitantly, “he is such an exceptional beauty that I find his lack of garb ... disturbing.” She stared at Spock, keeping her eyes at face level, keeping her gaze

locked with his. She let a slight drawl creep in, doing her best Scarlett O'Hara, "I may not be able to eat ... food."

Spock noticed the effect on Turin. The implication in the sentence was unmistakable. Spock raised his eyebrow slightly, fully aware of what Joanna was doing and was grateful for the well phrased intervention.

"Hmmmm, yes, I do see what you mean, my dear. Very well ... Trel," Turin bellowed. Instantly the servant responded. "Bring the blue cafta for Spock." Trel nodded, than left. Almost at once he returned with a blue, gauzy type material that he held up and, at Turin's nod, gave to Spock.

Spock took it and put it on. "My gratitude," he intoned, meant for Joanna.

"Yes, yes," Turin waved. "I think you should thank our guest, Spock. And see that you do it properly!"

Spock frowned slightly, then something surfaced from his memory. The culture of the Empire was based on a mixture of medieval and modern. Moving to Joanna, he bowed and thanked her. "My Lady, I am grateful for your words." Spock hoped she understood the cryptic message ... *'I am glad you are here. I am relieved to discover an ally in this place.'*

Joanna smiled and nodded. *'I'm glad I'm here. You need help.'*

They stared at each other momentarily as if hearing each others thoughts. The moment was broken by Turin.

"Well, now that we have dispensed with the distractions, Spock, you may serve the meal!"

As if on signal, Trel and three other servants brought the food into the room. They arranged it on a serving table, then the three bowed in Turin's direction and left the room. Trel glared at Spock, who joined him at the serving table.

"Start with the juice and the fruit. Next serve the cheeses and pastries."

Spock nodded mutely, then picked up the ornate ewer. Moving to the small table, he poured the pink liquid into the gold colored goblets. Turning, he caught Joanna's eye, held it for a second, then moved to bring the fruit to the table. He felt Turin's hand on the back of his thigh as he set the tray on the table. The Vulcan froze in place, not sure of what to do. Turin's hand moved up his leg; he became all too aware of his annoyance. Deftly stepping to the side, he dislodged the hand.

Instantly, Turin was on his feet. His hand lashed out and caught Spock on the side of the head. Stars danced in the Vulcan's vision as another blow connected. He was every bit as strong as the Vulcan. Perhaps stronger.

"Hear me well, slave! When I say you are mine to do with as I please, I mean just that. You will not pull away from me or flinch from my touch!"

Spock looked at Turin darkly, about to protest, but stopped seeing the slight shake of Joanna's head. He took a deep breath, holding himself rigid, jaw clenched tightly. Kirk had better get here soon!

"Bridge to Commander Sulu."

Sulu groaned then punched the button next to his bed. He had just laid down. "Yes,

Commander Uhura."

"I have a priority transmission from Deep Space 2."

"Very well. Message content?"

"We're to report in for refit."

"Wonderful. Couldn't happen at a worse time. Any way we can delay?"

"Negative. I already asked them to check the schedule. There's nothing else open for the next 5 months out here. We're not due to rotate in for another 6, then the closest base will be Gamma Epsilon. You know what their facilities are like."

"Scotty would have a fit if we took his wee bairns to Gamma Epsilon," Sulu chuckled.

"Very well," he said coming to his decision, "send an affirmative response. Also ask Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott and Security Officer Cameron to meet me in the Captain's briefing room."

"Aye sir." He heard the click of the closing link and rubbed his hands over his face.

"What next," he muttered as he took a deep breath, centering himself.

The door to the briefing room opened to admit McCoy and Scotty, followed by Chapel. Cameron had beaten them to the meeting and was sitting in the seat usually occupied by Chekov. "We have a problem," Sulu told them as they sat down.

"Which one?" McCoy commented, prompting Sulu for elucidation.

"Our turn for refit has finally come up. We have to take it now or wait until we get near Gamma Epsilon and go in there." He paused and looked at the four faces. "I have already confirmed this one. I know Mr. Scott, you would not favor a refit at Gamma Epsilon. That shipyard may or may not have what is necessary for our refit."

"Aye," Scotty agreed slowly, "but what about Mr. Spock?"

"I've given that a lot of thought. The only option I can see at this point is sending additional rescue personnel to meet up with Mr. Chekov and his three people. Mr. Cameron, I've asked you here so we can coordinate our efforts with Mr. Chekov's plan. It would do no good having two groups running around down there without coordination. We need to have a concerted effort. I know Mr. Chekov has his 'game plan' and we need to know what that is."

"Very good, sir. I'll go get it from our system now and bring it back. It's in Mr. Chekov's personal unit. He doesn't like to put his action plans on the shared system until the operation is finished."

"Good. While Mr. Cameron does that, we must sort out who this group will comprise."

"I think I should go," Chapel spoke immediately. "I've been on Farouk Tau many times when I was younger. My family connections have an 'in' there. I can help."

"Very well, Doctor."

"Count me in," McCoy added. "Captain Kirk is showing signs of waking up. He should be up and around by the time *Enterprise* reaches the station. All we're doing is babysitting him at the moment. His fractures are completely healed. Medically, except for the coma, I could release him now. Dr. W'lache can watch him as well as Chapel or I could."

"The refit is really my responsibility. All the Captain does is sit and wait for me to tell him it's done and everything's fine. I can't take her in."

"Then there's no problem with my going along. Now the next question is how do we get

there ...”

“Well, we do have tha’ wee freighter sittin’ on the hanger deck. I think I may be able to work a wee deal wi’ the captain,” Scotty grinned.

Cameron returned and sat down, popping a disc into the desktop. “Sorry to interrupt, Sirs, but here is Mr. Chekov’s action plan.” A city grid appeared on the screens of each table top unit. “As you see, he has annotated the grid and potential areas of search, centering heavily on the ‘servant procurement’ area.”

“Slave trading?” McCoy asked.

“No. It is exactly what is says,” Chapel explained. “It is a section of the city where household and personal servants are trained and hired. The servants of the Teronian Empire actually fare quite well. They are unionized and treated fairly by their owners. Any servant who has a complaint with their owner can take it up with a review committee made up of representatives of the various religious and social organizations in the Empire. If the employer is found guilty then they are shunned and brought to financial and social ruin. The only exception to this law is the royals. But since they rely on the willingness of the people to follow them, their indiscretions are usually kept to a minimum. Except for Turin, that is. He gets carried away at times, but he has never killed anyone. The Empress makes sure he is disciplined when he slips up.”

“What are the chances Mr. Spock may be in Turin’s hands?” Sulu asked. They all ignored the obvious question of “does the system really work and are there really no slaves?”

“Actually, quite good. Turin likes the exotic and unusual. And Shnarr is Turin’s base of operations. He governs the city. It is not far from the throne city and he can travel back and forth easily. Plus, he and his sister have instantaneous contact. The problem is, if Turin does have Spock, Chekov will never find out. He and his group will never get close enough to the keep. I, however, can. I’ve known Turin for years. I spent many vacations there with a cousin.”

Sulu looked questioningly at her.

“Sobutai Takara of the Takara mercantile empire. We’re first cousins on my father’s side. His sister married Odobai Takara.”

“You think Tuirn will recognize you?”

“I’m sure he will. It’s festival on Farouk Tau right now and I know Sobutai will be there. This is a time when all major trade agreements are renewed. Sobutai will be there as spokesman for the Mercantile Guild.”

“Very well. Mr. Cameron, please make sure we have three copies of the plan downloaded into the tricorders that Mr. Scott will give you. Mr. Scott, how’re the modifications coming along?”

“Slowly. I truly dinna know if they’ll work. From the readings I’ve gotten from the bio section, it seems tha’ the physiologies are almost identical.” He sighed. “They’re nae better than the ones I supplied Mr. Chekov an’ his people wi’.”

“Ok, well, do what you can. Let’s get ready. Mr. Scott, let me know when we can depart.

“Aye. I’ll go an’ talk to the freighter captain now.”

“That’s all. Thank you all.”

McCoy and Chapel headed for Sickbay. "You sure you want to go, Chris?"

"At this moment, I'm the best chance you have at finding out if Spock is with Turin."

McCoy nodded. She was right. He knew it, Sulu knew it, Scotty knew it. "Go pack your stuff. Let me know what I'll need to blend in."

"What's your cover going to be?"

"Hmmm, hadn't thought about that." He frowned as he walked. "I know ... I'll be interested in folk remedies. Do they have lots of those?"

"Hundreds," Chapel answered. "I'll be your assistant. Sulu can be our pilot."

"Good. Now, let's go start getting our stuff together."

They fell silent as the lift arrived. Both hoped Scotty would be successful.

Scotty walked over to the freighter captain. "Captain, I have a deal for ya."

"I'm listening." He looked at Scotty suspiciously.

"We would like ta borrow your wee ship for a few days."

"What do you mean, 'borrow'?"

"Just that. Borrow it and return it in good condition. In fact, in better condition than it was when ya set out on your last run."

"Why?" He was really suspicious now.

"One of the crew is being held prisoner on Farouk Tau. We need a way to get in, get him out and back here."

"Why can't you just go back and get him?"

"Because we are under orders to return to Starbase for refit. Since we can't reschedule those orders, we're sending a team to meet with the one tha's already there. Cover more area. There's just one minor problem. They need transportation."

"If I refuse?"

"Simple. I impound your vessel for the safety violations tha' caused your systems failure tha' my lads and lassies are sure ta find."

"This is blackmail!"

"Nay, lad. 'Tis just lookin' out for the welfare o' your crew. As Chief Engineer of a Federation vessel, I have tha' authority."

The captain glared at Scotty. "All right. Take the ship. You haven't given me any choice."

"I know ya'll be happy wi' tha' decision. Thank you." Scotty beamed as he left Sickbay. In the corridor he hit a comm. "Mr. Scott ta Mr. Sulu."

"It's done?"

"Aye, it's done. My people are workin' on her now."

"Before you asked?"

"Aye ... I c'n impound her ya know."

"Understood. Thank you Mr. Scott. Sulu out."

Joanna slid into the chair across from Sobutai. Signalling the waiter, she sighed and leaned back. "There's a problem. A massive, bloody problem."

Sobutai paused, his food halfway to his mouth. Placing the bread and petash back on the plate, he took drink of shesa and regarded her evenly. "We were correct."

"Oh boy were we. It's ... a really complicated one. I may have to alter my tack."

"Why?"

"He's intent on making the subject in question his personal one."

"You're sure?"

Joanna glared at him then took the cup of shesa the waiter placed in front of her. Taking a sip, she felt the liquor burn all the way down. Somehow, it felt oddly comforting. "Besides the fact that the one in question was stark naked and I was told so."

"He must be protected," Sobutai mused, taking another bite of his food.

"I can distract him for only so long. He is intent on this."

"Let's go plan ..." Sobutai smiled as he signaled the waiter and dropped credit chits on the table.

Joanna tossed the rest of her drink down and followed him.

Joanna lounged on the divan as she watched Sobutai pace the common area of their gertan. "Special Ops is not going to be happy about this."

"I know, but *I* can't very well sleep with Turin. Besides," Sobutai grinned, "he's not my type."

"Ok, so we're agreed that I have to take a more proactive part in this instead of be the 'bait'.

Sobutai nodded. "What do you think Spock is going to do?"

"Well, number one, he fully expects the cavalry to arrive at any moment and whisk him away to safety. Number two, Jim and my Dad would never speak to him again if he got himself killed, and my Dad would have his head. I know, it would be rather redundant. So for the time being he will feign obedience to commands that is within his capacity to obey. If Turin presses the sex thing, he's going to refuse. It's my job to see that things don't go that far."

"You can't be there 24 hours a day, my lovely one," Sobutai frowned. "Remember, we still have appearances to keep up," he whispered, nodding in the direction of the door.

"Servants," he mouthed, then leaned down and kissed Joanna passionately, while sliding his hand up her robes.

The servant backed out of the doorway silently and glided away to the next tent.

When Sobutai was sure she was gone, he stopped the kiss, lingering for only a second.

"Now," he said, sightly breathless, "where were we."

Joanna grinned at her friend. "Turin, 24 hours a day ... Pretenses."

"Yeah, pretenses." Sobutai grinned.

"Then I will have to do what is necessary."

Sobutai nodded and poured two glasses of cool juice. Handing her one, he raised his glass, "Whatever is necessary."

She saluted back and both drank. The pact was sealed. They would get Spock out,

whatever the cost.

Sulu sat at the helm, familiarizing himself with the controls in front of him. He heard McCoy and Chapel stowing supplies in the storage areas. It was going to be a slow trip. The freighter was an old one. He doubted even Scotty's genius could get it to go faster than warp 4.

"The gyros are out of synch," he muttered to no one in particular.

"We're workin' on it laddie," Scotty assured him as he walked by with his tools.

"How much longer?" Sulu asked.

"About another five hours. I dinna want to send you out in something less safe than the *Enterprise*."

"Gonna take a lot of work."

"Aye. That it will. That's why I have my top teams workin' on this ragged bucket o' bolts."

Sulu grinned at Chekov. "Nice to know we're going in style."

Chekov surreptitiously checked the tricorder for readings. Trying to find Vulcan life signs among Teronians was like trying to find the proverbial needle in the proverbial haystack. He was going to be rendezvousing with his team in an hour. Maybe one of them had a lead. They had all heard vague rumors of a new servant at the Keep. He had been found on the cliffs, but no description was forthcoming. He walked, lost in thought, taking in the surroundings when a voice broke his thought.

"Pavel?"

He turned in the direction of the voice and recognized it's owner immediately.

"Joanna..."

"It's so good to see you!" She hugged him and whispered, "Come with me. I know why you're here."

He immediately returned the hug, giving her the expected kiss on the cheek that is the norm for the meeting of male and female friends in Teronian society. "How have you been?"

"Oh, delightful," she drawled, putting on a show for the nosy. "What say you come have a drink with me."

"Delighted," Chekov replied, catching the eye of one of his men approaching. A quick hand signal conveyed his message "Meet in two hours at the rooms." He offered his arm and walked through the market with Joanna, making small talk and laughing. Once they reached a tavern, they turned in and made for the private, sound proof booths in the back. These were usually used for things other than talking. Once seated on the divan, Joanna punched in the drink order and turned to him.

"I have seen him. Remember always, my dear, that in polite conversation on Farouk Tau you never use a name in a public place, unless you are with the person." Chekov nodded in acknowledgment. "He is well, at this moment. His continued good health will depend on how well the other can be distracted from him."

"The other?"

"You heard the rumors?" Again Chekov nodded.

"Understood," he confirmed. "How will this thing be done?"

"I will be the one to make this thing happen."

"No, that is not permissible."

"Pavel, there is no other way. I am not here alone. My partner and I have talked about this at great length. We will do what is necessary!"

Chekov looked at the intensity of the blue eyes and read the truth of her statement there. If necessary she and her partner would give their lives to save Spock.

"Very well. What can we do to help?"

"How many are with you?"

"Three. All top people.

"I will let you know. Where are you staying?"

"The inn."

Joanna shook her head. "We must be together. Gather your people and meet me at my gertan. She called up a city map and showed him exactly where she was. "We have ample room and have access to what may be needed." She fell silent as a door in the wall slid open for the drinks. Handing one to Chekov, she waited until the door closed before resuming. "Well, we should stay here for a little, so let's get caught up."

Chekov smiled and welcomed the chance to relax a little.

The hour and a half had been passed with ease between the two old friends. Chekov had always enjoyed Joanna's company from the first time he had met her. He had spent shore leave on Rigel with Sulu, Uhura and Joanna and her friends from her first ship. It had been a very ... eventful shore leave. He smiled slightly as he walked with his group toward her dwelling. He replayed her career in his mind. The decorations were many; her passion for research, much like her father's, had accorded her two Nobels and many patents on treatments. In the Academy, the names of the crew of USS *Ranger* was breathed with almost the same reverence as *Enterprise*. In Starfleet medical Joanna McCoy was as revered as Leonard McCoy. Only now, there was only one McCoy actually in Starfleet.

Chekov held up his hand and stopped, signalling his people that they had arrived. The gertan was an amazing piece of construction. It was a large, round dwelling reminiscent of the Mongol dwellings on the Steppes. The material that covered the latticework frame was of brightly colored silkene, the roof with its round opening at the center was a neutral color of the same material. There were corridors leading off the main common area to separate sleeping areas of the same construct. Around the gertan was enough room to provide for privacy and breezes to pass through. This, he thought, explained for the sprawl of Shnarr.

Within a short period of time, they were settled in. Chekov had to admit it was better than the crowded, noisy inn.

Leonard McCoy watched the stars flow by as the freighter cruised at warp 5. They had

left *Enterprise* behind, warping toward Deep Space 2. Christine had briefed the three of them on Farouk Tau's culture and lifestyle. Now all they could do is wait.

Spock was somewhere in that maze of tents and markets. Lord only knows what was happening to him. Damned ridiculous. Routine missions. In all his years in Starfleet, he had yet to be on a 'routine mission' that went as planned. Complications were the norm, not the exception.

"Coffee, Leonard?"

"Hmmm? Oh, thanks, Chris."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Oh, Spock, different things ..."

Chapel sat down next to him. "The Captain has regained consciousness and is chomping at the bit to follow us. Dr. W'lache has threatened him with sedation if he doesn't stay put for the last day of observation."

McCoy merely nodded.

"You seem preoccupied."

"I'm worried about Spock." A sigh escaped him as he sipped his coffee. "How bad can it get down there Chris?"

Chapel thought for a moment as if weighing her thoughts. Finally, "It can get pretty out of control during Festival. They have this drug called xanthis ..."

McCoy interrupted her. "That's what we were sent down to get!"

"Doesn't surprise me. It's a hell of an aphrodisiac. Depending on the dosage taken it can make you more amorous to completely blasting away any and all inhibitions and or defenses you may have for everything. I've seen it forced on people who did not want to participate in sexual activities during Festival. Give undiluted, it can almost drive insane with desires. You know what's happening, but you have no control over it. The drug literally takes over. It's a great seller on the Black Market."

"Why would Starfleet be interested in it?"

Christine shrugged, "Blackmail purposes. Make someone more pliable ... Who knows."

"How is it obtained?"

"It's controlled rigidly by the Zaras sect. They own the cultivators, they harvest and process it. They give it to the distributors. Once the distributors have it, it can go anywhere. It's used in the pleasure houses all the time. The men and women who work there know about it and have been trained that it is part of their profession."

"Prostitution is legal there?"

"Yes. In fact, going to the pleasure house when you reach the equivalent human age of 13 is expected for both males and females." She saw McCoy digesting this information. "It's quite a different society."

"Sounds like an interesting one. I wish we were just going on a shore leave so we could learn more," McCoy commented, his curiosity aroused.

Chapel smiled, "You'd have fun. Good food, good drink, beautiful women. It would be just what the doctor ordered."

Joanna waited at the door of Turin's quarters to be announced. Chekov and his people had been settled in and she left Sobutai to brief them. She could not be late for this appointment. She couldn't risk putting Turin in a foul mood. "Lady Joanna is here, Lord Turin," the servant announced.

"Thank you," Turin smiled tightly. It had been a frustrating day and his new slave's reticence was not improving his mood.

"You will be a challenge," he mused, undressing Spock with his eyes.

Spock shifted, uncomfortable under the scrutiny. This was not the way things were supposed to happen. He should have been rescued some time ago. His concern was growing. What could have delayed Kirk? Why had they not found him? Was it possible that there was a similarity between Teronian physiology and Vulcan physiology?

"Come, our guest is waiting!"

Joanna turned her head as Turin, followed by Spock, entered the room. She was relieved to see Spock appeared in good health. She assessed Spock as the pair approached. Spock was wearing a different garment now. One that definitely would enhance his desirability for Turin, and, Joanna noted, was having quite an effect on her.

Spock wore a simple daszhi of midnight blue sikeen. It was a comfortable looking garment, part kimono style, part Arabic robe. Oddly, the Vulcan looked right at home in it.

"Ah, my dear, admiring the garment ... or the man?"

"He looks quite ... dazzling, my Lord." She smiled winningly. "But I think it would look better on me."

"I shall have a much nicer one made for you. And I would be honored if you would just call me Turin."

"Very well ... Turin." She watched as the Teronian gracefully moved around the low table and seated himself on the cushions. He held out his hand for her to join him.

"I have had my kitchen prepare a special dinner for us. It is one of the delicacies of the planet."

Without further elaboration, he clapped his hands. Servants brought laden trays and carafes of different colored liquids in and arrayed them on the low table.

Joanna's mouth watered from the inviting aromas. She could identify some of the dishes, but the one on a large, gold platter in the middle of the table puzzled her.

Joanna ate slowly, her attention more on the Vulcan than on her food. Why hadn't he tried to escape? Surely he'd had plenty of opportunity with Turin in meetings most of the day. He was standing there as relaxed as if he were on the *Enterprise*.

"Is the Rameesh to your liking?" Turin asked.

"What?"

"You are frowning. Is it the Rameesh?"

"No. The Rameesh is fine."

"Then why are you frowning? What has displeased you?"

"Nothing has displeased me. Everything is wonderful," she smiled.

"No, I think I know what the problem is."

Joanna felt her breath catch in her throat. How could he have found out? Turin turned his head toward Spock, giving Joanna the necessary seconds to regain her composure.

"You are jealous, my dear." Spock stopped by Turin and refilled the gold wine goblet. Absently, the Teronian ran his hand down Spock's thigh.

The Vulcan glanced at Turin's hand, then calmly moved to Joanna's side and refilled her goblet. Spock did not flinch, or react to Turin's touch in any way. He had allowed himself to slip into a light meditative state making Turin's advances easier to ignore. He returned to his position near the serving table.

"I must admit I am a ... little miffed about your neglecting me."

"It doesn't have to be that way. As I told you before, I will gladly share my bed with you any time."

Turin beckoned Spock over to him. As the Vulcan reached his side, he flipped the front of the daszhi up. He then cupped the Vulcan's genitals in his free hand. "Is he not magnificent?"

"Exquisite," Joanna smiled willing her embarrassment not to show. Now it was she who was becoming uncomfortable. *'This is getting out of hand. I hope Jim gets here soon.'* Joanna picked up the goblet and sipped the wine from it, watching Turin over the rim, hoping it would hide her now red cheeks. She had to stop Turin. He was delightfully fondling Spock, much to the discomfiture of the Vulcan. Standing, she walked over to wine, then back to the two men, "Wine, My Lord?" she asked, pretending jealousy. Ordinarily she would have continued the flirtation, keeping Turin at arms length until her departure. But with his obvious intentions toward the Vulcan ... She had to do something ... now.

"Thank you, My Lady." Turin took the goblet from her, smiling. "We are neglecting our guest, Spock. More wine for Lady Joanna."

She followed Spock to the table as he retrieved the ewer. Holding out her goblet, she searched his face. Blue eyes locked briefly with brown ones; seeing he was very tightly shielded, she inwardly sighed with relief and thanked her three years at the Vulcan Science Academy. Returning to Turin's side, she sat and sipped her drink.

"Sit!" Turin pointed to the floor in front of Joanna.

Spock moved to the spot and dropped to the floor facing the two. Turin sipped his wine, then held the goblet out to Spock. He did not move to take the drink. Without looking at Turin, Spock could feel the steady glare beating on him. Finally with a barely suppressed sigh, he took the goblet, holding it gracefully in his hands. What Turin's new game? Try to get him drunk. Well, the Teronian would soon find out it wouldn't work.

"Go on, drink it!" Turin ordered.

Spock noted the amusement in the voice. "It will avail little," he replied.

"Must I call my guards in here to pour it down your throat?!" The amusement was now gone, annoyance replacing it.

"That will not be necessary," Spock answered. Lifting the goblet to his lips, he downed the contents.

Turin accepted the now empty goblet waiting for the potent wine to take effect. He sighed when nothing happened. "A real challenge, this one," he smiled to Joanna.

"Your new slave ... Or me?" she inquired. "I have to warn you, I don't like being

ignored.”

“It was never my intention to ignore you.”

“You seem ... preoccupied with your new toy,” she pouted.

“You have my undivided attention, beautiful one. Besides, I get to spend so little time with you. I should take advantage of every opportunity ...”

She smiled slowly as she set the goblet down. “So, Lord Chancellor Turin, what exactly do you have in mind?”

“A night you won't soon forget, my dear Dr. McCoy.”

‘*I'll bet.*’ Joanna smiled as Turin leaned toward her. *Whatever is necessary*, she thought as the Teronian's mouth covered hers.

“Come with me,” Turin told her breathlessly, ending the kiss.

With a smile she stood as he offered her his hand. She had made the decision, now she had to give the performance of her life. Of course a small part of her mind was thinking this may actually be enjoyable as she was led from the dining area to Turin's private room. The beauty of the surroundings was lost on her as she watched Spock mutely follow.

The room was awash with the flickering light of w'tol candles. The hanging tapestries and silks in shades of red, gold and blue shimmered as the light reflected off of them. A soft desert breeze ruffled the hangings next to the windows. Large cushions scattered around the room matched the opulence of the hangings. A spicy fragrance hung in the air, making it smell fresh, clean. She watched as Turin removed his garments. The Teronian had insisted his new servant assist Joanna's disrobing. And she wasn't sure which of them had been more embarrassed. Spock had assured her under his breath that it was all right. She noted he kept his gaze so focused inward as to be oblivious to what he was doing.

Turin's hands caressed her body as she slid onto the bed next to him. He had watched her disrobing intently. Joanna forced herself to relax as it became evident he was not going to allow Spock to leave. ‘*Well don't just stand there, turn your back or something!*’ she thought desperately ‘*Having you hear is going to be bad enough.*’ She noticed then that his eyes had the glazed look of deep meditation. She realized, with relief, he was seeing, but not seeing. Still, as if hearing her, Spock turned his back. Now it was up to her to keep Turin's attention off the Vulcan. ‘*This is going to require the best acting job you've ever pulled off, kiddo.*’

She blanked her mind, trying to ignore the presence at the foot of the bed. It was hard for her to concentrate, her mind wouldn't stop. Thoughts whirled through at an alarming rate. She could just hear her father if he found out about this. Her eyes kept returning to Spock. ‘*This isn't working ...*’

Turin followed her gaze. “Is he distracting you, my dear?”

“Uh ... Yes. Could you please ...” she started.

“Of course,” he answered delighted. “Spock, come join us.”

‘*Oh, lord, that's not what I meant!*’ Joanna groaned to herself.

Spock came back to the present with a start. Had he heard Turin right? “I do not understand?”

“Join us, now!”

“You cannot be serious.”

"I am very serious," Turin snarled getting off the bed.

"It is not possible," Spock replied calmly, oblivious to Turin's menacing glare. "Vulcans consider the mating of two beings a deeply personal matter. It is an obscenity to force a joining where one is not desired."

"You forget yourself, Spock! I am your master. What I order, what I wish, is the only desire you need concern yourself with! And I *desire* you to join us!"

"Turin," Joanna started, attempting to intervene.

"I am sorry for his disobedience. Apparently he has not learned as I had hoped he would." Turin moved to Spock and grabbed the Vulcan's arm. Reflexively, Spock broke the hold and backed away. "Come here!"

Spock glanced around the room, then broke for the door. The opportunity had arrived. He made his move. The movement was so sudden it had caught Turin off guard.

"Karn!" Turin bellowed, recovering.

Stars exploded as a blow hit him from behind when he crossed the threshold. Staggering, Spock shook his head, trying to clear it. His arms were being pulled roughly behind him and twisted upward. It felt like they were coming out of the sockets. He was forced back the way he had come, through the door. A kick impacted with the small of his back, sending him sprawling.

Karn looked at the figure on the floor, then kicked hard. The resulting thud and grunt of the victim brought a slight smile to his face. He reached down and grabbed a handful of the blue material, forcing Spock to face him. His other hand, balled in a fist, flew threw the air and smashed into the Vulcan's unprotected face. Again and again Karn pummelled him. "You will obey your master, slave," he ground out.

Joanna winced with the first blow. As the second fell, she leaped off the bed, heedless of her lack of dress. Her only thought being to protect Spock. "Stop it!" she commanded in a loud voice.

Karn froze, blow in mid-strike and stared at her, astonished. Turin turned a questioning look on her.

"The gentlest master is the soonest victor," she told Turin quietly. "Besides, why let your trained gorilla ruin his good looks?"

"You do have a point," Turin agreed. He waved Karn away from the Vulcan.

Joanna quickly moved to Spock's side, ignoring the fact that Spock was very aware of her nudity.. Her hands probed and prodded the darkening areas on his face. Green blood ran in rivulets from his nose and a cut on his cheek. "I need water and cloth for compresses. Get me a brew of guena tea." The physician in her took over. She looked at the two men as they stood there. "I mean now!"

Turin nodded at Karn. The soldier's expression hardened. How dare this woman interfere in his pleasures!.

Joanna stood and retrieved her garment. Slipping it on, she moved back to Spock. "I didn't feel any broken bones. There may be a slight fracture in the nasal structure, but nothing your healing trance can't take care of," she said, her voice pitched for his ears only.

Spock nodded his understanding. He had never been so glad for an ally before. He was, rapidly getting out of his depth in this matter.

"Let me handle things. If he comes up with anymore of these hair brained ideas tonight, let me handle it. Don't do anything! Do you understand!" Again, Spock nodded.

A servant returned with the requested supplies and Joanna set to work. Her ministrations were completed quickly and efficiently. Spock lay there, marvelling at the ease with which she had taken control of the dangerous situation. His estimation of Joanna McCoy was raising as he watched her deal with this entire situation. She handed him a cup of steaming liquid. "This is going to make you sleepy. Let it! It'll at least keep you out of harm's way tonight."

"I shall. Thank you," he whispered to her taking the liquid. He sipped it under her watchful eye until it was gone.

Joanna stood and turned to Turin. "I've given him a sedative. He is going to need rest to recover from the injuries. He should be well by morning, but he needs the chance to rest. Is there a room nearby he can be taken to?"

"He's a slave, My Lord. Why pamper him? He needs to learn," Karn sputtered.

"He may be a slave, but an injured or dead one is of no use to anyone," Joanna returned heatedly, glaring at Karn. "Even you're smart enough to understand that!"

"Take him to the room across the hall. Karn, put a guard outside the door," Turin ordered.

"But, My Lord ..."

"Do it, Karn!"

Karn hauled the Vulcan to his feet and escorted him firmly out of the room. Once in the hall, he pushed the Vulcan into the wall, holding him there until the door was unlocked. "Be certain I will get you. Sooner or later, I get all who disobey. And that bitch won't be around to help you then!"

Spock started to react to Karn's words, but remembered Joanna's warning. Karn flung him into the room and he heard the door lock behind him. Joanna had bought him time. For that he was grateful. A quick examination of the room showed the door he had been thrown through was the only opening. He felt the sedative starting to take effect. Perhaps he should follow Joanna's advice. With a sigh, he made himself comfortable on the small cot and initiated the healing trance.

"Now, my dear, where were we?" Turin said as he moved to Joanna. "I am sorry for the interruption."

"What interruption?" Joanna asked, eyebrow raising. Once again, she felt his touch. Suppressing a sigh, she closed her eyes and blocked everything else out.

The guard saluted as Turin and Joanna stopped in front of him. He opened the door admitting them to the small room. Joanna crossed over to Spock and looked down at him. The bruising was almost completely gone. The small cut healed. Taking a deep breath, she called his name. He stirred, then spoke muttered a response..

"Are you ready?" Joanna asked him.

"Yes," he whispered as if from a great distance.

A sharp crack sounded as she struck him, open handed, across the face, once, twice.

Spock reached up and grabbed her hand before a third one could connect. "That is sufficient," he announced. He turned his head, looking at her. He could see the concern in her eyes. He also noted she looked like she hadn't had much rest. It surprised him that she would sacrifice herself to assure his well being. Then his eyes rested on Turin. He suppressed a sigh and sat up. "I am fully recovered," he declared, eyeing the Teronian warily.

Joanna nodded, then turned to Turin. "No more beatings! His anatomy is different from yours and mine. Any blow hitting the wrong place could be fatal!"

"I shall remember that. I certainly wouldn't want to lose this treasure." Turin looked between Spock and Joanna. "You seem to know quite a bit about this species."

"Only medically," Joanna shrugged. "Most of the Vulcans I've worked on have been unconscious. Surgeons generally don't have scintillating conversations with their patients in the operating room." She glanced at Spock one last time. "Well, Turin, I really must be going. Thank you for the ... hospitality," she grinned.

"May I walk you home?"

"No. I can find my way. Besides, I'm sure you have business to attend to." She needed time to think. There were reactions from her encounter with Turin she needed to sort out.

She brushed by the Teronian, who caught her for a last kiss, then left the room. She felt revolted with herself and with everyone and everything in general.

Turning the corner of the hall, she ran headlong into Karn. "Damn!"

"Leaving so soon, pretty lady?" Karn moved toward her, forcing Joanna to back up. "I thought you'd be staying so we could become better acquainted."

"Get out of my way," she warned. Her backward progress was suddenly stopped by a wall. "Shit!"

"You're not in a hurry, are you? I have a few things in mind for us." Karn moved closer, reaching out laying his hand on her breast.

Joanna froze at the touch. *Come on ... A little closer.* "Just what did you have in mind," she said, forcing herself to smile.

"I can satisfy you more and better than Turin." His hand travelled down her body.

She felt his hand between her legs. Gritting her teeth, she kept smiling as he got even closer. Suddenly, she lifted her knee sharply, with all her strength and impacted him in the groin. With a loud moan, Karn doubled over, gasping. A second kick from her sent him to his knees. "Don't ever come near me again or I'll kill you," she spat her anger with everything coming out. Swiftly moving away from him and heading for the gate of the keep.

"Bitch," he gasped, trying to clear the stars from his vision. "I'll deal with you later!"

Joanna stepped into the bright sunlight. Her eyes felt gritty. She hadn't had much sleep and the encounter with Karn had left her shaken. She was going to have to be careful around that one. He was dangerous. Rubbing a hand over her face, she took a deep breath.. She had to find Sobutai.

The walk to the gertan went quickly. Flinging the flap aside, she crossed the living area and entered Sobutai's room. His bed was empty.

"Damn! Where the hell are you?" As she crossed to her room, she tossed the robe on the divan. Where is Sobutai? She had to find him. She really had no desire to repeat last evening's

activities. They had to get Spock out ... and fast.

Spock tugged once more on the chain linking him to the wall. He had been kept in the small cell when not in 'attendance' on Turin since his escape attempt this morning. He had almost made it to the door of the keep by mingling with some merchants who had come to meet with Turin. The untimely intervention of Karn, Turin's guard Commander, foiled his attempt. Karn had taken him to Turin, who was extremely displeased. But other than being confined and chained, nothing had happened. He was sure Joanna's earlier intervention was responsible for the lack of anything more serious happening. With a sigh, the Vulcan sat on the floor.

The sound of voices outside the door drew his attention. Slowly, the door opened, admitting Turin. "Drink this!" he ordered, handing a mug to the Vulcan.

"I do not wish anything," Spock replied.

"I tire of your games! You can drink this willingly, or I will have Karn pour it down your throat. It would give him pleasure to do that."

With a sigh, Spock reached for the mug. Satisfied, Turin watched him drink it.

Sobutai met Joanna in front of the keep. A steady stream of revelers headed in the huge gate. She had found him at lunch and briefed him on everything that had happened. Chekov had been there when she returned and he was aware of the events. The plan had been laid. With luck, they would have Spock out and Sobotai. They easily slipped into the throng. Once inside, they headed for the preferred guests entrance to the great hall. The soldier scanned their invitation and quickly admitted them. It did not take them long to find their seats. And, Joanna noticed, they were not far from Turin. Not far at all. "This might work out," Sobutai mused as he looked up and down the tables. "I make about ten places at most between us and Turin. And where Turin is, Spock will be."

"Let's hope we can pull this off and get everyone out of here in one, healthy piece."

"I heartily agree!"

Places filled quickly as the rest of the feast invitees entered. Wine was already being served as Turin and his entourage made their entrance at the far end of the hall. As the procession made its way toward the dais, she caught sight of Spock. To her dismay, he had a leather collar around his neck. Attached to the collar was a chain.

"Damn. Do you see?"

"Yes. Something must have happened." Sobutai shook his head.

"Shit."

"This complicates matters. We'll have to figure some way of getting that collar off," he whispered to Joanna as the procession got closer.

They watched as Turin led Spock to the high seat at the table. Spock obediently took his position behind as Turin seated himself, signalling for the food to be served. Spock, Joanna noted, did not so much as glance around the room. The Vulcan kept his eyes forward, seeming not to notice, or care to notice, his surroundings.

The room was crowded. Music, conversation, the noise of the food being served filled the

air. The large open area at the center of the room started filling with dancers and musicians. Soon, the rhythmic beating of the dumbeks added to the clamor. Conversations broke off as all eyes turned to the dancers.

Swirling colors filled the floor as fabrics spun around the lithe bodies. Slowly the dancers shifted from one side of the floor to the other, their bodies moving in sensuous rhythm with the drums catching and holding the eye and ear. Now more dancers joined the first group. Male dancers pairing with the female dancers forming smaller groups, weaving the dance into an intricate pattern. Rhythms became more intense, the pattern more intricate, the movements hypnotic.

Joanna leaned forward on her hand, propping it under her chin, mesmerized by the colored patterns in front of her. Feeling Sobutai's arm slip around her waist, she slid closer to him. There was a truly sensuous quality about the dance. Nothing overt, but there nonetheless. Finally, the dance ended and more food and wine was served.

Glancing at Turin, she caught his eye as he was looking around the room. Turin, glass in hand saluted her. She smiled in return, then speared a piece of meat viciously onto the end of the dagger. Nibbling on the food, she leaned back in the pillows watching the others. Oddly, she felt comfortable here. It was like a fantasy world come to life. Sitting forward, she swallowed the remainder of the wine in her cup. It was immediately refilled by a handsome, young servant. Looking at him, Joanna noticed his firm body and smiled. He noticed it and smiled back.

"Quite a little bash, eh?" Sobutai asked, leaning closer so she could hear him.

"Certainly is. I kinda like it. More people should have parties like this. Who are all these people anyway?"

"Heads of merchant houses who have long standing trade agreements with the Empire. Ambassadors, nobles major and minor, friends, hangers on, those who want to be noble or who enjoy the fine art of sucking up. Anyone and everyone. The people serving the feast are from the finest entertainment houses on the planet. The dancers are the best around as are the musicians. There is no end to Turin's extravagances."

"With an unlimited expense account I guess not. And what about you. How come you rate such a prominent seat?"

"My family has been dealing with Farouk Tau for decades. We are one of the more prominently established merchanters here. All the people sitting here belong to such families or are major nobility. I have been making the trade run to Farouk Tau since I was fifteen. Old enough to learn the ways of the soul, as the natives say."

"That's an interesting expression. What does it mean?"

"Sexual maturity. Puberty. Whatever you want to call it. My father was a firm believer that we should all learn about it from some of the most competent practitioners in the galaxy."

"Works for me," Joanna smiled sipping more wine. "So exactly what is going to go on here?"

"Eventually, this will disintegrate into an orgy."

"I've never been to an orgy before. Sounds interesting," she quipped.

"Depends on how open-minded you are."

"Let's just say I'm pretty much open to new and exciting experiences."

"Good."

More dancers flooded into the center. The noticeable difference was that they had fewer clothes on. The crowd appeared to be more interested than earlier. Many were openly leering. The drum beat was more intense, more insistent. The movements more suggestive.

Movement in her periphery caught Joanna's attention. She saw Turin pull on the chain that fastened to Spock's collar, bringing him next to Turin. Turning her head slightly, she watched the interaction.

Spock knelt next to Turin. "Dance for me!" he commanded, his voice a soft drawl.

"I am no dancer, my Lord. I am afraid you would find my efforts awkward and most displeasing," Spock answered just as softly.

"You may dance for me here and now or you may go with Karn to the barracks and dance for the soldiers there. Decide!"

Turin signalled for the collar to be removed. Slowly Spock got to his feet, face closed, eyes remote, as he moved to join the other dancers in the center of the room. He stood for a moment, listening to the music, trying to catch the rhythm. He took a step, turned slowly and took another step, almost bumping into one of the other dancers. He sighed and began to move in the other direction when a second dancer went whirling by, twitching Spock's robes as he did, laughing as the Vulcan awkwardly drew away. The crowd too was laughing and Spock fervently wished the music would stop. His embarrassment grew as he bumped into a third dancer and she turned and slapped his face, angrily shouting at him to find someplace else to practice. A glance at Turin showed the Teronian sitting tensely upright. His eyes glittered with anger. Finally the music stopped and the other dancers moved off, melting into the crowd, leaving him to stand alone. He walked slowly back to stand in front of Lord Turin who looked him over silently then gestured to the pillows beside him. Spock sat down stiffly, trying to ignore the taunts and mocking comments that several of the guests were calling to Turin. He had warned the Teronian that his performance would be less than adequate. Turin had persisted in disbelieving him.

Joanna sat staring at the Vulcan, a bemused expression on her face. She wondered briefly if he was truly that clumsy or if it were the circumstances that had made him so. It had certainly been ... interesting. She would not want to be on the receiving end of Turin's bad humor after that little display. The young servant interrupted her thoughts by pouring more wine in her glass. Absently, she reached up and caressed his rear, sliding her hand along the back of his thigh. The wine was making her a little giddy, but it felt good.

"Well, at least he's got that collar off of him. That may make it easier."

Joanna leaned against Sobutai. "Do you think we'll be able to do it?"

"Truthfully? No."

"Play it by ear?"

"Yup," Soboutai answered as he held out a slice of fruit to her.

Joanna smiled as she let him feed it to her. As much as they needed to get Spock out, she really didn't want to break the ... spell that had come over her. It had been a long time since she felt this glamorous. She certainly had never felt this decadent. More food followed the wine. Delicacies designed to delight the eye and the taste. Some pastries with graphic depictions. Some sculpted into sexual tableaux. She studied these and noted their anatomical accuracy.

"I see what you mean," she commented to Sobutai.

"About what?"

"The ... obsession this society has for sexual activities."

"This is mild. I'll take you to see some of the really graphic shops. And the art in the Artists Quarter is even more unrestrained. The models actually engage in the activity while being painted, holographed, sculpted, you name it."

"Sounds interesting. Maybe I'll take a field trip there tomorrow."

"I'll go with you. I kinda like it there myself. Besides, you can learn a lot of interesting things about this place there."

Once again dancers flooded onto the floor clad only in a bronze colored oil that made the torchlight shimmer and dance off their skin. The beat of the drums became frenzied and the movements wilder. This time there was not subtle sensuality. The eroticism drove the crowd into a frenzy. People at the lower tables reached for dancers as they passed.

Joanna watched, fascinated as the dancers swirled creating intimate poses with their movements. The ripple of well trained muscles under the bronzed skin was exciting. She found her eyes glued to the body of a tall, darkly handsome man as she watched his thrusting hips. Desire, need, want seared through her as she imagined what he would be like. She became oblivious to all around her as she lost herself in his movements.

Turin smiled as he saw the crowd respond to the dancers. Another moment and he would sound the signal. Let them wait. Anticipation was many times as good as the event. Suddenly he nodded. The gong shattered the air. A roar went up from the crowd. Men jumped over the tables and grabbed dancers. Clothes flew in a frenzy as if they burned the skin they touched. The Festival was now truly underway.

The woman next to him leaned to him and smiled. Needing no further invitation, Turin removed his tunic.

Joanna felt strong arms grab her about the waist. A tangle of cloth obscured her vision momentarily. When it cleared, she felt a slight breeze on her skin. She felt as though she was on fire. Desires overwhelmed her. Turning her head, she saw Sobutai throw the last of his garments onto the floor. His touch burned her flesh exciting her further. His mouth ignited bonfires where his lips touch passed. Then a second mouth joined his, kissing her. She opened her eyes and saw the young servant. He smiled at her then made his way down her body.

Waves swept through her as she felt his lips touch her. Her mind clouded as physical desire met relief. But the relief was short lived. She wanted more like a soul possessed. Greed for sexual attentions overwhelmed her. Reaching out she grabbed the servant's hair, pulled his face up. Instantly he obliged, plunging deep into her. Moaning with pleasure, she surrendered completely to the chaos her body wreaked upon her. Sobutai's mouth fanned the flames as his lips caressed her breasts. The rhythmic pounding rocked her increasing the fever. The universe became centered in that movement, the rhythm, the long, slow rhythm.

Spock watched as the scene melted into near riot. Pulling his knees up, he clasped his arms tightly around them trying to avoid physical contact with those closest to him. It was becoming harder to maintain control. Fascination and embarrassment waged war as he found himself unable to close himself from the flood of raw, sexual emotion that now surrounded him.

and he realized that his shields were crumbling. What was happening to him? Why could he not stop the assault? It should have been so easy. A Vulcan child would have been able to stop it. Spock lowered his head to his knees, his shame evident. But he wanted ...

Joanna lay on the pillows momentarily spent. Breath came in gasps. Someone held a cup to her lips and she drank. Her throat felt raw, as if she had been screaming.

"Are you all right?"

"I ... I think so." Turning her head, she saw Sobutai holding the cup. Someone else held her. A second later she realized it was the servant. His strong body cradled hers gently. He had taken her without restraint. She had given herself the same way. "So this is an orgy," she mused.

"This, my dear, is the mother of all orgies."

"That's putting it mildly." Reaching out she took the cup from Sobutai and drained it. He refilled it for her, smiling.

"I had the feeling you'd enjoy yourself."

Desire overwhelmed her as she felt Sobutai's touch. Again she succumbed to the physical intensity of the moment.

Leaning against Sobutai's chest as she sipped a glass of water. The two watched as the rest of the participants showed on sign of winding down. She felt him move; his cloak fluttered to rest over her. "Thanks."

"You had goosebumps."

"What do you think?" she asked looking in Spock's direction, fighting the desire that was pummeling her. '*What is necessary.*' The words pounded through her forcing her to return to herself. The Vulcan sat huddled in back of Turin's seat, head resting on his knees.

"We can try. I don't know if we can do it."

"I'll go find out."

"You all right?"

"Truthfully, I have no idea. I don't think I have any legs. My brain is basically mush and I want to throw you down and take you. But, other than that, I think I'm in one piece." She turned to look at him and grinned. "Hell of a party, eh mate?"

She stood, draped the cloak around her and made her way toward Spock. Pulling the hood over her head, she knelt next to the Vulcan. "Spock ..."

He lifted his head and turned his face toward her. "Joanna?" His voice was rough, raspy; his face strained.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes ... No ... I ... I am not sure. The emotions ..."

"Listen to me. I don't have much time before someone sees us." She leaned closer to his ear. "We are going to get you out. I don't think we'll be able to do it tonight, but if, by some miracle, the chance arises, be ready to move." Spock nodded. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Closing her eyes, she waited for the next move. Muscles tensed, ready for a fight.

"I was wondering where you've been." She immediately recognized Turin's voice. "So, you want to try him. Be my guest, my dear. I want to see his performance."

With a smile at Spock, she turned to face Turin. "My Lord, I didn't want to disturb you. And Spock looked so forlorn and ignored, ... I was"

"You lust for him as I do," Turin smiled, thinking he knew. Her only response was a smile. He would never know that right now, this moment, he was absolutely correct. The most disturbing thing was, she didn't know why.

She allowed Turin to pull her to him, the cloak falling from her shoulders. It fluttered to the floor in front of Spock. Impulsively, he picked it up and started to give it back to her. He stopped in mid-gesture. She was naked! He inhaled sharply. His eyes travelled over the length of her body in spite of his attempt to control it. She was beautiful, a work of art come to life. Well conditioned muscles moved sleekly under tanned skin. Her head was thrown back revealing a beautifully contoured neck. Spock watched as Turin's lips made their way down that neck to her breasts. Spock closed his eyes and turned his head, trying to blot out the vision. Emotion churned within him. Emotion he had almost convinced himself he did not have. Emotion he had held in check all his life. To his shame, he wanted her. He wanted to touch that skin, that neck. He wanted to caress, kiss that body with abandon. He had to get out of here. He was losing himself. What had Turin done to him!?! He opened his eyes again and saw Joanna was reclining on the pillows. Turin reached his hand out to her. "Take her ..." It was the final blow. He retreated towards the corner of the recess behind Turin's seat. He could not ... He was Vulcan!

Turin saw Spock moving back, away from them. The Vulcan had a closed expression on his face. "I wish you to please her!" Turin commanded. Spock hesitated, warring with his desires and himself. "Come here! I order it."

Spock felt Turin's hand on his wrist. He felt himself being drawn closer. The touch tingled on his skin. Feeling, passion, intense desire coursed through him. He pulled away, wrenching his arm from Turin's grip, and ran.

Instantly the Teronian was on his feet calling for the guards. Spock did not get far. Two soldiers caught him and took him back to Turin. Another order was snapped and seconds later a large goblet of a clear liquid was in his hand. "Hold him!" Turin ordered as he pressed the goblet between Spock's lips. Spock tried to pull away.

"I've got him," Karn said as he moved quickly to subdue Spock's struggles.

Spock felt a vice like grip lock his head into place. The liquid poured down his throat, choking him. He couldn't breathe. He felt like he was drowning. Then suddenly air returned to his lungs. Breath came in gasps.

"Again!" Turin ordered.

A second goblet was pressed on him. After long seconds, he could breathe. Nausea swelled in his stomach. His vision began to waver and he struggled once more to get loose. The drug was producing such an overwhelming terror, such a paralyzing disorientation that he realized he was losing control. The one fear that had haunted him since childhood was the fear of losing control. But he was Vulcan and he *would* control! And then the last of his shields collapsed. Emotions tore through him and he cried out.

"He's yours Karn! I want him broken!"

"Certainly, My Lord," Karn smiled coldly. "Bring him!" he ordered the soldiers.

Joanna watched as they drug the now unresisting Vulcan out of the hall. '*Damn, damn, damn.*' She cursed herself for her inability to intervene and cursed Spock for his reaction. Most

of all, she cursed Starfleet rampant stupidity.

"My most profound apologies, my dear. Some slaves are too ... stubborn for their own good."

"No need for apologies. I do understand," she smiled. Inwardly she cursed all Vulcans. She turned her attention fully on Turin.

Sobutai watched, captivated by the drama that unfolded on the other side of the table. Spock had been removed from their proximity. Any and all chances of helping him escape were gone, for this night at least. He smiled to himself as he watched Joanna take the change of fortunes in stride. She immediately switched her focus onto Turin. He had no doubt she would charm the Teronian even more thoroughly with her wiles. She definitely made a worthy partner.

"Would you like a drink?" Sobutai held out two glasses. Joanna took one and almost dropped it as he handed Turin the other.

"Jesus!"

"Easy." Sobutai quickly grabbed the glass to keep it from falling.

"Thanks. I don't think I have any strength left."

"I'm not surprised. Maybe the juice will help you." He paused. "It's time to go home."

Turin sipped at his drink watching as people slowly gathered their belongings and filed out of the hall. "You'll see that Joanna gets home all right?" Sobutai nodded.

It took several minutes for Joanna to be able to dress. She could hear the muted conversation between Sobutai and Turin as she tried to pull herself together. After the episode with Spock, she had lost all control. She knew exactly what was going on, what was happening, but couldn't control it.

Finally she was on her feet and they followed the last of the stragglers out through the main door of the keep. As they moved out of earshot of the guards Sobutai turned on her.

"What happened with Spock?"

Joanna shrugged minutely. "Turin wanted him to ... have sex with me and he rabbited. He told me he was being bombarded by the emotion. He was overloading and couldn't handle it."

Sobutai nodded. "I was afraid something like this would happen."

"Another moment and Turin would have never remembered Spock was there."

"I have absolutely no doubt about that," Sobutai agreed, sliding his arm around her waist. He pulled her closer to be sure their conversation was not overheard by passersby.

"Karn is going to be a problem," Joanna muttered thoughtfully. "He has Spock. Turin told Karn to break him." She ran her hand through her hair in agitation. "I couldn't do anything to help him. I lay there ... All I wanted was for Spock to ..."

"I know," Sobutai soothed. "It was the drug."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Why do you think he's going to be a problem?"

"We've already had a run in regarding Spock. I was able to stop him from doing too much

damage before but now I doubt Turin's going to care whether Spock's hurt or not." She ran her hand through her hair. "Sobutai, Spock said something about emotions and he looked like he was being affected by what was happening around him. I've never seen that in a Vulcan before."

"Maybe it was the drug," Sobutai said thoughtfully.

"What drug?" She whirled on him.

"Turin gave us all a drug as part of the festival. Maybe he gave something to Spock."

"I think you'd better explain this to me," she told him icily.

"Part of the festival ritual is the fertility rites. In ancient times it was thought that if all did not participate, the gods would be angry and no children would be born or crops grown or herds increased. To insure that all took part the priests developed a drug that releases inhibitions, enhances sexual desire and promotes enjoyment."

"Oh goody, the ultimate aphrodesiac!"

"Precisely. At the beginning of each ritual it was passed out to all the participants. A custom that has continued to the present."

"How nice. And just how long does this quaint little ... stimulant last?"

"Forever ... Unless you get the antidote."

"Forever?"

"Yeah, it's quite addicting." He saw the blank expression on her face. "Not to worry. That last drink you had was the antidote."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me before this!"

"Well, I did. I don't think you were listening."

"When?"

"When we first talked about coming to Festival."

"And I'm supposed to remember a conversion from six months ago ..." She sighed. "Do you think that's what Turin gave to Spock? The liquid in the goblets was clear."

Sobutai groaned. "Sounds like undiluted xanthis to me."

"Oh, peachy," Joanna sighed. "Which means?"

"He's going to be one very messed up Vulcan."

McCoy glanced around the huge pavilion the in front of them. Christine had made inquiries at the port and got directions to the Takara gertan. It was like something out of the *Arabian Nights* his father had read to him as a child. To his surprise, Chekov sat in the common room making notes on his tricorder when they entered. "What are you doing here?" he asked the Russian

"I ran into Joanna. She's aware of the situation and is helping," Chekov explained briefly.

"Joanna!!!! What's she doing here?"

Chekov shrugged his shoulders, "Unkown. But I'm glad she is. She has seen him and says he's fine."

"Not anymore," Joanna's voice interrupted as she and Sobutai walked into the gertan. "Hi Daddy," she greeted McCoy, giving him a hug. Within mintues the new arrivals had been briefed and the situation updated.

"So, what do we do?" McCoy fumed.

"Wait," Sobutai said taking a piece of fruit from the tray on the table. "There's no way we can get into Karn's private play room."

They saw Chekov stiffen as he raised a warning hand. The call from outside the tent proved him right.

Joanna turned at the sound of her name to see Turin and his guards standing outside. "Lord Turin. How nice to see you again," she greeted, inviting him in.

"And you, My Lady." Turin looked inquiringly at the others.

"Lord Turin, may I present my father and his two associates, Sulu and Chekov. They've come for Festival.

"Dr. McCoy, this is an honor. I must tell you your daughter is a favored guest." He turned to Chapel, "Christine it has been too many years." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"I wasn't sure you'd remember me," she smiled.

"I will never forget the fun we had. You were quite the talk of my court for several years!" He turned then to McCoy.

McCoy took Turin's outstretched hand in a firm grasp. "Ah'm certainly glad to heah you favor my Joanna. And Ah'm equally pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Sulu?"

"Lord Turin." Sulu shook hands, smiling.

"I just stopped by to see how you were doing, my dear," he turned to Joanna and placed his hand on her arm, "and to invite you to stop by my shelter tonight at the square. Karn has assured me the dancing will be marvelous. Well, it was nice meeting you, but I must take my leave. Duties call."

The three watched Turin walk off into the crowd followed by his bodyguards.

"I wonder what he meant by that remark about Joanna?" McCoy mused.

"It was curious," Chris agreed.

"Spock," Joanna muttered. She looked at Sobutai, who nodded his agreement. "You all need to know the full story. Please, sit down, be comfortable." She sighed, embarrassment threatening to close her throat. "This will take some time for me to explain."

The four from the *Enterprise* looked around the market square. The portable stalls were gone that usually inhabited it were gone. In the center was a bonfire, leaping and crackling as revelers danced around it. Clothing, they noted, was optional.

"I could get to like this kind of party," Sulu grinned.

McCoy snorted, glancing around.

Chekov nodded, eyes glued on the dancers, looking for signs of Spock. Wordlessly he accepted a cup that was thrust at him.

"Welcome to Festival."

"Thank you." He watched as the lady melted into the crowd. Sipping the drink absently,

he resumed his observation of the dance. Only the ending of the music broke the spell. Looking around as if he had just wakened from a dream, he smiled a little guiltily at Sulu. "Sorry."

"Open camp is this way," Christine motioned with the glass she held.

They pressed through the crowd. As they moved, they felt bodies rubbing against theirs. They saw men fondling women. They saw women fondling men. Open sexual displays were in full swing. Finding a man with a pitcher, they got their cups refilled. The group finally made their way to a large open area that was ringed with colored canopies. The crowd sat or stood under them eating and drinking. The four slowly made their way through the crowd, finding a place to stand.

The canopies had created a large, open, circular space. Looking around, McCoy spotted Turin. "Come on, let's get closer to him! Spock should be there," he said quietly to the others.

They found their way blocked by two servers "What can we give you?"

"Wine," Chekov said promptly. The other three held out their glasses to be refilled.

"Let's go!" McCoy growled, impatience rising. He wanted this done. After Joanna's tale this morning, his concern for Spock's safety was growing.

The crowd parted reluctantly for them, making for slow going. Music started playing as they finally made it near Turin's canopy. "Check," Sulu muttered as they saw the ring of soldiers around the perimeter of the covering.

"Damn!" McCoy muttered. "Do any of you see him?"

"No," three voices answered. They had a fairly unrestricted view of Turin.

"What do you want?" a soldier, probably an officer from the look of his uniform, demanded as they tried to get closer.

"Just trying to get a better view," Christine smiled sweetly. "We heard there was going to be some wonderful entertainment."

"You'll have to go back to the other side. This area is restricted."

"Come on," McCoy growled, pulling on Chris' arm. "We're not getting anywhere here."

"Bad mood," Chekov shrugged to the soldier as they started back through the crowd.

Joanna and Sobutai strolled toward the Open Camp. The ride through the desert at sunset had been beautiful and had afforded them complete privacy to discuss their part of this mission. They reached the outskirts of the throng just as the music started, music to entertain until the dancers were ready. A soldier saluted and allowed them to pass. They were expected.

"Well, joyous Festival to you," Turin greeted as they reached his side, he waved them to a seat. They settled down to watch the dancers.

Joanna looked around the crowd. The canopies around the huge circle were packed. People pushed and jockeyed for positions to see. The colors of their garments created a moving water color image. A servant held a glass out to her. She smile and accepted it. "Do you think this is safe?" she whispered, leaning toward Sobutai.

He shrugged, then emptied the contents of his glass. "Probably not, but we have not choice," he whispered back.

Joanna nodded and followed suit. Instantly both glasses were refilled.

All eyes went to the center of the circle as the dancers moved into it. The circle of wood

that waited for their arrival was lit and flames danced as the music took on a more rhythmic beat. Bodies flowed around one another as the red of the flames danced off their bronze-colored skin. Her eye was drawn to one tall, graceful dancer in the middle. The others seem to weave around him as if he were the focus of their dance.

Recognition suddenly hit. Joanna sat up in her chair; Spock was the dancer. "Jesus! Sobutai ..."

"I know," he agreed, reaching over to rub her back, hiding her sudden reaction. "There, is that better?"

Turin looked at the two inquiringly.

"She twisted something in her back while we were riding," Sobutai explained. "It spasmed on her."

"Would you like me to send for a healer?"

"No, thank you. It'll be fine. Just needs to get the muscles stretched," Joanna smiled, suiting action to words. Turin and Sobutai watched the cat-like stretch with appreciation.

Christine turned to follow McCoy, bumping into a man in priest's robes. "Oh, excuse ... Pritr?"

"Christine? Garus bless, but it's been years." The man embraced her in a hug.

Returning the hug, Christine pulled back to arm's length. "You look wonderful! What have you been doing with yourself all these years?"

"I'm a full priest. I have finally achieved my goal."

"You were an acolyte last time I was here. How wonderful. I'm so pleased for you." Behind her back Christine motioned for Sulu and Chekov to follow McCoy. "Are you here alone?"

"Unfortunately, yes. And you?"

Christine shrugged, "Same."

"Well, why don't we get caught up?" Pritr smiled, taking her hand, kissing it.

"Sounds delightful." She allowed him to lead her to a blue canopy. She looked over to McCoy and nodded. McCoy returned the gesture.

"Who was that?" McCoy asked Sulu and Chekov.

"A priest. Seems like they knew each other," Sulu answered. "Maybe she can get some info from him."

"I don't like leaving her ..."

"I think she can take care of this situation, Doc."

Their conversation was interrupted by dancers. The group formed in the circle, a tall dancer in the middle forming the focal point of their movements. Light from the fire danced off their skin intensifying the beauty of the movements.

McCoy tore his attention from the dancers. Impatiently he looked around the crowd. "Where the hell is he!?"

"Bozhe moi!" Chekov breathed. "He is there!"

"Where?" McCoy and Sulu asked simultaneously.

"There." Chekov pointed directly at the tall dancer.

"That's him?" said Sulu.

"Damn!" McCoy spat.

Entranced, they watched Spock move through the figures of the dance. The three stared in disbelief. "Am I dreaming?" McCoy murmured softly.

"If you are, we're havin' the same dream," Sulu answered dazedly.

"It is more like a nightmare," Chekov amended.

"Now what do we do?" McCoy asked.

"I do not think this was expected," Chekov muttered, the initial shock wearing off.

Christine stiffened as she recognized the missing First Officer in the transformed figure in the circle. "Good heavens," she said in astonishment as Spock wove through the dance.

"He is good, isn't he?"

"Yes," she smiled. "Most ... fascinating."

"I understand he's Turin's newest plaything."

"Really? Where'd he get such a marvelous ..."

"Takes the breath away, doesn't he?" Pritr smiled.

"Oh ... absolutely!"

"Enough about the dancer. Neither you or I can have him. But you and I ..."

The dance ended to the frenzied beat of the drums. The crowd roared its approval as Turin beckoned Spock to him. The Vulcan knelt in front of Turin's chair.

"I am well pleased with you," Turin said, stroking Spock's cheek. "Come, stand by me!" Gracefully, Spock rose and took the indicated place. "Well, my pet, should we invite Lady Joanna to the keep with us?"

"Whatever is your wish, my master," Spock answered.

"Joanna, would you honor us with your presence tonight?"

"I ... " she glanced at Sobutai.

Sobutai frowned as he looked at Joanna.

"Ah, jealous?" Turin asked, noticing.

"Wouldn't you be?" Sobutai asked Turin as he took Joanna's hand, kissing it. This was not going as planned.

"Of someone as beautiful as Joanna? Without a doubt. Perhaps if Spock asked? He is no threat to you, I'm sure. Ask Lady Joanna, Spock! And do it nicely."

Spock walked over to Joanna and hesitantly took her other hand as he dropped to his knees. "Would you please come back to the keep with Lord Turin tonight?"

Joanna smiled tightly. The hand Sobutai was holding increased pressure on his. He could feel her anger in that grip. "I would most certainly be delighted," she drawled. She saw the palpable relief in Spock's eyes. *'What have they done to him?'*

"But Joanna ... Do what you want!" Sobutai growled, releasing her hand. Standing, he bowed to Turin, "Your leave, Lord," and stalked away before Turin acknowledged.

"I hope this doesn't cause a problem," Turin said with false concern.

"He was becoming tiresome, anyway," Joanna shrugged. She had never been more glad for the tiresome coming out parties her mother had made her go through. "I prefer much more ... scintillating company." She held out her hand to Turin, who rose from his seat and took it.

"Come Spock," Turin said as he led Joanna into the keep. "See that the camp is amply entertained. And I want NO disturbances tonight!" he told Karn as they stopped momentarily.

"At your command, My Lord," Karn bowed.

Joanna followed Turin into the keep. She had hoped to be able to sit in the warm bath in her gertan. *'So much for that idea,'* she thought as she walked through the halls.

"This is my favorite sitting room," Turin smiled. It has a beautiful view of the gardens. And with the moon out tonight, it will be breathtaking." He raised her hand to his lips.

Joanna smiled. She was aware of Spock's gaze on her and Turin. The door opened on a moderate sized room, the walls hung with beautiful tapestries and arrases. It looked as much like a pavilion as a room could. Food was laid on a low table at the far wall. Moonlight cascaded through the French-style doors; w'tol candles added their golden glow to the silvery one. Large overstuffed cushions lay scattered on the floor. There were no chairs. Stepping over the threshold, she felt transported to an earlier, simpler time. To the time when the people of Farouk Tau had been nomadic tribes.

Turin walked over to the server, whispered something to him and sat on one of the cushions, motioning to another for Joanna.

Spock stood, waiting for instructions. He was afraid Turin would forget about him.

"Spock, come over here!" Turin took his cup from the server. "Pour a drink for Spock! He deserves a reward for his dance."

Spock took the cup and waited until Turin took a drink. He then drained the contents. He had not realized how thirsty he was.

Joanna smiled as she accepted her drink. The wine was cool and it went down easily. As soon as she set her half empty cup on the table, the servant filled it again. She looked at the cup, then picked up a fruit from the table. She was determined to stay clear-headed tonight.

"Spock, open the door to the gardens!"

The Vulcan obeyed. Seconds later the sweet scents wafted into the room. It reminded Joanna of the oasis she and Sobutai had ridden out to that afternoon. So far their plan had not proceeded well.

"Are you enjoying your time here?" Turin asked her.

"I am now," she replied, smiling at him as she sipped her wine.

"I'm glad." Turin touched her hand lightly. His green eyes held her gaze.

She felt mesmerized by that intense look. Blinking, she broke the spell. Picking up the cup, she rose gracefully and moved to the doors. Despite her intentions, she was starting to feel light-headed. Having come into the camp directly from the ride, eating very little, then drinking potent wine on top of it all was having it's effects. "It's beautiful out there."

"Would you like to go for a walk?" Turin said next to her.

"That would be lovely." She smiled up at him. Perhaps the fresh air would help.

The two stepped into the garden. Turin guided her through the fragrant flowers and herbs, naming each one they passed. Shrubs and trees rustled in the light breeze as they followed

the path away from the keep. Looking at the layout of the garden, a plan was formulating in her mind. If she could somehow get Turin out of commission ...

"What's the name of those trees?" she asked pointing to the tree line in front of them.

"Jestal trees. They have a bright yellow flower on them when they bloom. They bloom in the winter season. There is color in this garden at all times of the year."

"And beyond them?"

"The cliff. My new pet was found on them not too far from here. There is an old path that leads to a back gate and up to the ruins. My father used to walk up there to think in private."

"Really?" She turned to face Turin. He was even more handsome in the moonlight, she had to admit.

He rested his hands on her waist, pulling her to him. Turin had no intention of waiting any longer. Kissing her, he let his hands move to the buttons of her shirt.

"Wait ..." she murmured, pulling away from him.

"I will have you."

"Not out here. It's ..." she searched for a reason, "a little chilly out here."

"Then we will go back in."

Joanna looked surreptitiously at Spock. He had not moved. He sat, waiting for Turin's return.

She noticed the server had left the room. The Vulcan immediately filled Turin's glass and gave it to him. Joanna sipped her drink, wondering what Spock was up to.

"Offer our guest more wine, Spock. After all, you did invite her. Let's not be discourteous." Turin smiled at Joanna. "Quite a change, isn't it?"

"Yes, My Lord," Spock mumbled, glaring at Joanna.

She caught Turin's amused look as Spock almost spilled the wine on her in his haste to move away from her. "Certainly is a change from the last time," she replied, taking another drink.

"Karn's work. He taught Spock what a joy it is to serve me."

"Karn must be very dedicated to you."

"Karn is dedicated to himself, his own advancement and his pleasures. I am the one that can give all he desires as long as he serves me well."

Joanna could feel Spock's stare. The dislike was almost palpable. She tried not to squirm, then opted for another drink. What was wrong with him? Didn't he know she was there to try and help him? He was acting like a jealous adolescent. She put the empty glass on the table.

Spock didn't move to refill it. He stood like a statue at Turin's side, trying to ignore Joanna's existence.

"I don't like you neglecting our guest, Spock," Turin said quietly, glancing at Joanna's empty glass.

Spock stiffened, then hurried to fill the glass.

"Thank you." The glare from the brown eyes shocked her. "And where do I fit into the equation?" she smiled, turning back to Turin.

"The unknown variable?"

"Indeed," Joanna smiled, moving closer. "What would you say if I told you I have my own plans for advancement. Plans that include you, My Lord Turin." She locked gazes with him.

Slowly, she leaned forward and kissed him deeply. Her mind worked furiously. She was making this up as she went along.

"You'll have to tell me about these plans some time," Turin murmured as he slipped the shirt from her shoulders. That was not part of her plan.

This time she did not stop him. Joanna was going to meet him on his own terms, passion for passion. At the moment it was all she could do. Still, he stirred something deep inside her. If Spock wasn't here ... She lay back on the pillows as Turin's mouth covered hers. The intensity of the kiss left her a little breathless. His touches arousing desires that burned through her. She watched as he removed the boots and toss them into a corner of the room. Seconds later, the riding pants followed.

Turin gazed at her, feeling his arousal. She lay on the pillows, a work of living art. Her body sculpted, molded into the perfect form. His eyes drank in the sight. Perhaps he had finally found the woman that could compliment him in all things. Someone to sit by his side ... A woman whose appetites could equal his. He didn't know what she had done to possess him, but she certainly had. He looked forward, eagerly, to seeing her. It was as if she had woven a spell around him.

Spock was there instantly, helping him undress, running his hands across Turin's body. Turin felt his response to those touches. At last this slave was performing as was his duty.

Joanna watched Spock's actions with dismay. '*Karn did his job a little too well,*' she thought to herself. "Turin ..." Her voice was a soft, enticing purr.

Turin turned to Joanna, Spock completely forgotten. Without a word he covered Joanna's body with his. Hot silk engulfed him as he felt her acceptance. He drove deeper, her legs locked around his hips pulling him to her. She had a scent, a flavor that intoxicated him, drove him wild with desire. He wanted to own her, possess her, but knew he never would.

Nothing existed outside of her; every second fanned their lust higher. They were locked in a rhythm that was uniquely theirs until their music reached its crescendo.

He felt her legs tighten around him, keeping him. Her hands gripped his shoulders, her strength surprising him. Then he felt his own release and he collapsed on top of her, the intensity drained.

Spock stared at the two, anger and disbelief warring in him. How could Turin disregard him for her? Turin hadn't told him to leave, not yet. He had to get Turin's attention back! If this woman succeeded in ensnaring Turin he would be sent back to Karn. He would do anything not to be sent back to Karn.

Still, the scene in front of him held him entranced. He could feel their emotions surging through the air. The waves washed over him and through him. He wanted to be a part of that passion. With each thrust, his desires grew. She was beautiful. He could see why Turin desired this woman. Her sensuality was overt as well as covert. He ached for her. He wanted to feel her wrapped around his body as she was wrapped around Turin's. He wanted to feel that abandon, that release. Slowly, he moved toward the two. Both lay panting from their exertions. Reaching out, he laid his hand on Turin's arm. He did not want to be excluded, a mere spectator. He was, after all the one who issued the invitation.

Turin looked into Spock's eyes. He smiled at the Vulcan. "So you want to be included?" At Spock's nod, his smile widened. "Any objections?" he asked Joanna.

Joanna reached for the glass she had left on the table. The Teronian retrieved it for her, holding it out to her. "Thank you." The wine went down easily, intensifying the sense of unreality. But she had gotten Turin's undivided attention, at least until this moment. All her good intentions vanished in a puff of smoke. She realized that the drug had once again taken control of her.

"What is your wish, Joanna?"

"It is your wishes that matter my Lord," Spock countered scornfully, "not hers."

Joanna looked at Spock, part of her wanting to scream at him, part of her caught by the implicit challenge in his words. An eyebrow arched upward as she stared evenly at the Vulcan. "You're the master here," she told Turin with a slight shrug. Now, she desperately wanted to get out of here with the Vulcan. She knew she could no longer trust herself or her control.

"Not yours. I do not command you."

She turned and looked at Spock. His eyes burned with jealousy and what almost looked to her like fear. "It could be ... amusing. We can see exactly how well trained he is," she drawled. The words slipped from her. Her restraint was gone. Her mind worked furiously, but her body would not respond.

Before Spock could respond, Turin waved his hand to the Vulcan. With a quick jerk, he ripped the pants off of the Vulcan. "He awaits us," Turin said.

Joanna watched Turin's hands. She could see the response to the touches, caresses as Spock reacted. It was certainly different from the first time Turin had attempted to seduce him.

At Turin's nod Spock moved toward Joanna. Suddenly, there was an intensity in his brown eyes that caught her completely off guard. Desire burned in his gaze. The raging lust was unmistakable. It reminded Joanna very much of Vulcans in Pon Farr. Fear welled up, but again, she could not react to it. She, too, was overcome with desires she could not control.

She kissed him deeply. Joanna felt him washing through her mind. The physical desire was unmistakable. She felt Turin lifting her, but she didn't care as the aching need started to consume her once more, her body responding as she felt something hard under her buttocks. She opened her eyes and saw Turin smiling at the tableau in front of him. Turning her head slightly she saw he had sat her on the table, dishes and fruit had been swept out of the way. Spock was there, she felt him, physically and mentally. His desires melded with hers until nothing else was there. The sensations grew quickly as she squirmed under him. She needed that release. It was almost as if she were being driven mad by his prolongation of it. Suddenly, he was gone from her. A deep throated moan escaped her lips as she felt the emptiness, muscles convulsively trying to recapture him. She felt warmth engulf her. The ache intensified into pain. Now she was writhing under his ministrations. He was everywhere. She could not stop the moans. Release was so close, so ... And again, he stopped. A groan escaped her lips. "Please ..." she whispered as Spock moved from her, leaving her mind a maelstrom.

Turin sat back on his heels and watched her agony. He smiled as he watched her undulating hips, heard her plea. "Do you want him?"

"Yes, please, yes."

"Do you want her?" he asked turning to Spock.

"If you command," the Vulcan intoned, but his breathing was ragged, his eyes on fire with passions he did not recognize.

"No, I will finish this," Turin grinned wickedly. Touching her he could feel her muscles start to quiver; he took her without mercy as cries tore from her throat. Quivering wracked her body and he thrust in for the final time. He felt himself shoot his hot fluid into her. There was so much of it he thought he would never stop as her muscles contracted against him, almost drawing it from him. Then it was over. She lay on the table limp, unmoving.

"You took unfair advantage," she said after a few moments.

"Of course. Did you expect otherwise?"

"No. But now, I think it's my turn." She slid off the table and moved to him. Pushing him down on the floor. She was determined to control him this time. Slowly, she brought his arousal to a crescendo. Moans escaped from his lips as he waited for her to allow his release. Suddenly, she moved away from him. "Two can play that game," she grinned wickedly as he opened his eyes. She had moved to Spock's side and sat with the Vulcan. Spock did not move to touch her. "So, Turin, which one of us will it be to finish what I have started? Your choice."

Turin sat and looked between the two. He could see Spock's jealousy in every taut line of his face, emanating from the glare in his eyes. The picture of a snarling predatory cat came into his mind, ready to spring at the threat to its territory. And he saw Joanna's response, the defiance she radiated back, telling him she didn't recognize any boundaries of his. Two predators waiting for some signal to tear each other apart.

Mustering his control, Turin sat back and picked up his wine, sipping it, studying the two over the rim. It would be most interesting to see which one would come out the winner in this contest of wills. "Neither," he smiled wickedly. "I'd rather watch you and Spock finish." His smile grew at the look of fierceness on Spock's face. She smiled, slowly, a smile as wicked as the Teronian's.

Spock snarled something in Vulcan. Joanna's hand sliced through the air as the insult left his lips but never reached its target. Spock deftly caught her wrist and jerked her hand behind her back. With a deft shove he propelled her backwards causing her to fall, landing on the pillows behind. Just as quickly he was on her, pinning her arms above her head with one hand, pounding savagely into her.

Her laughter taunted him, increasing his fury. He would prove to her he was man enough for her.

"Is this how you prove your manhood, by force?" she whispered tauntingly. "Any beast can force himself on a woman. It takes a man to know how to satisfy a woman. Are you a man or a beast?"

"Should I not act like the beast you believe me to be?" he returned bitterly.

"I can have the beast anytime. Show me the man!"

Her whispered words seared into him. Slowly he released her hands. The intensity devoured him. The depth of the desire washed over him, drowning him. Reality dissolved into a timeless void.

Slowly, he felt his anger evaporate. Spock raised his head and looked at Joanna. His gaze was immediately captured by her eyes. He felt himself sink deeper and deeper into that blue regard, as if she had cast a spell on him.

Joanna was mesmerized by his penetrating gaze. The intensity of it held her captive, unable to break the communion. She felt herself being drawn into him, deeper and deeper.

Swirling emotions and desires cascaded around her until she became lost in them. Feeling was all there was, everything was connected in the now slow rhythm that the two embraced in.

Spock let himself flow down into that clear blue. Her passions seared him as he felt them rise to meet him. He felt the merging of their emotions, their passions, as they spiralled further into each other. Spock felt the blending of their beings, the combining of their essences. In that merging, he found comfort, a security he had not known for a long time. Unconsciously, he opened himself to her completely and he felt her acceptance as she opened herself to him.

Turin couldn't pull his gaze away from the tableau that unfolded in front of him. Two bodies, both strong and supple, both beautiful, locked together in such intimate embrace. He was almost giddy with the sight. Slowly, as if nothing existed, Spock rose to his knees, letting Joanna lay back on the pillows, his hands pulling her hips to him, the slow, measured thrust disappearing into her. It was the most exquisite piece of art he had ever witnessed. The perfect symmetry of the bodies as they surged in primal heat beat into his mind.

Joanna's eyes closed as she lost herself in the slow movement. Pleasure washed through her. With agonizing slowness he lingered, each stroke increasing her ache. Moans escaped her lips. She tried to increase the pace, but he controlled her. In this, he was, indeed, her master. He controlled her passion, measuring it out bit by bit, drinking it into him. Looking up, she saw his face set with the effort it was taking him to control himself. His eyes met hers. He filled her completely. She let his strength awaken her as no one else's ever had. Her body surged and ebbed with his. They were locked together in a rhythm as timeless as the universe, primal, untamed. Closing her eyes, she felt as if her entire being was centered in his driving force. She was no longer separate, distinct.

Spock felt the exquisite pain, exquisite pleasure of being inside her. His desires for her controlled him. The feelings were so intense he felt immolated, burned to the core of his being. He revelled in them, in the pain, in the ecstasy. Each thrust, each breath, each movement Joanna made in response was electric. She had become everything. She held him within her core, her essence, giving freely to him. Responding as no one ever had.

Turin could watch no longer. Bending down, he kissed Joanna hungrily. He could feel the rhythm increase under him as she rocked with the movement. Her lips were so soft. He slid down to her neck, her breasts. His tongue ran across her abdomen. He could feel the quivers of the muscles under the touch. He watched, momentarily fascinated by the rhythmic motion inches from him. Shifting himself slightly, he brought his lips to Spock's stomach. He heard a groan escape the Vulcan's lips. He felt the warmth of the Vulcan's skin. Turin let his mouth wander as he moved behind. Back muscles rippled with the movement. Moving closer, he pressed against Spock's back, rocking with the motion. Turin positioned himself, gauging the movement. Closing his eyes, he thrust forward, timing it with Spock's, plunging himself into that tight warmth.

Spock shuddered, feeling the invasion. A third had joined! Muscles felt torn, shredded. And still he wanted more. Body and mind surrendered to the network of shared sensations linking the three together in agony and pleasure. He was the center, the focal point. Pain waved through him like hot irons, then became excruciating pleasure. It grew, a creature of his own making until it consumed him, overwhelmed him. Body and mind surged with finality as oblivion engulfed him.

A cry broke from Turin as he surged into Spock. The intensity of the climax was unbearable. Slipping from the joining, Turin leaned heavily against the table.

Joanna shot upright, against Spock, his arms closing about her as she felt him pound into her, triggering her climax. She felt his fluid jetting into her as she held him tightly. White flares flashed through her mind, then dimmed as blackness started to cover her vision. She felt herself falling, slowly, back toward the pillows. She still held him cradled in her. His arms still locked around her.

Reality came back slowly. He was held in arms that comforted him. Turning his head slightly, he saw Joanna's face inches from him. Her eyes were closed, she was under him. He tried to move from her, but her hand on the back of his head stopped him.

"Stay," she whispered. "Stay with me for a little."

He allowed himself to settle into her embrace, breathing her fragrance. The frantic desire was replaced by lingering euphoria as he felt her fingers entwined in his hair, her body cradling him, embracing him.

Joanna felt her mind slowly clearing. Spock's arms held her, his body covered hers. The intensity of their physical release had shocked her. She had blacked out momentarily.

Spock felt his arousal. He wanted her again. Her softness, her fragrance, her touch all made him want to take her. Slowly, he began to move and she responded. He buried his face into her neck, inhaling deeply as the rhythmic motion slowly began. Her hands on his back felt hot, burning as they lay there, then slid down to caress his buttocks. Lifting his head, he looked at her face. Her eyes were still closed, a slight smile rested on her lips. He lowered his lips to hers.

Joanna felt the first feather light touch of his lips. Then they were back, more solidly as the passion of the kiss grew. Waves, reflecting the rock of their movement, swept through her mind, ebbing and flowing with each thrust he made. She felt her need growing. He was there, in her, yet she ached for more of him. She felt as if she had been starving and this was the only thing that sated her. And yet he would not hurry or allow her release. He controlled her. Her hands entwined with his as his mouth slid down her neck. His mouth felt hot on her breasts as he covered them. She could feel his pleasure, his enjoyment.

Turin watched the two, still trying to clear his head and catch his breath. He smiled in delight as he saw Joanna respond to the overtures. He wanted her again, but it was still Spock's turn. He could wait; after all, they had all night.

"Spock," Joanna whispered, as she opened her eyes. The Vulcan brought his head up and looked at her. "Now! I need you to take me ..." Blue eyes locked with his brown ones as they became entranced with each other. It was as if each held some magical power over the other, mesmerized by the other's face, look, eyes, locking their souls together. Spock did as she asked.

He felt her shuddering begin, felt her mind spiral up through colors and stars as she exploded in her climax. Then he joined her as he became part of that explosion. He cried out as he lowered his head to her shoulder, both their bodies locked in the tremors of release. He pressed his hips tightly into her as she held him there. The ecstasy of the instant took them both higher than before, sending the world spinning out of control. Spock felt Joanna's body go limp under his, her breathing coming in ragged breaths. Gently kissing her shoulder, he rolled away from her, the room spinning in his vision. The floor felt cool under his back as he stared at the ceiling, trying to regain his equilibrium. Glancing at Joanna, he sat up and reached for her goblet.

Gently, Spock held up her head and gave her a drink. Joanna took sips of the wine, letting them trickle down her dry throat. Opening her eyes, she saw concern coloring his dark eyes. "I'm all right," she smiled. "I haven't had this much exercise in a while. Just need a couple of minutes to catch my breath." She turned her gaze on Turin.

Turin looked at the two. Slowly he moved across the floor to them. First he kissed Joanna, then Spock. He would not be able to maintain control much longer. They had him completely enthralled, under their control. "Magnificent!" he said as he touched Joanna's face.

Joanna smiled as she let him pull her down with him.

Joanna opened her eyes. The sun shone on the garden. The smell of the desert morning greeted her. Turning her head, she saw Turin and Spock locked in an intimate embrace. She quickly controlled the anger that was surging up. She hadn't meant to fall asleep.

Turin looked in her direction as he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. "Good morning."

"Mornin'" she responded, rolling onto her stomach, propping her head on her arm. Something about the scene in front of her captivated her attention. Beads of sweat trickled down Turin's face as he continued his endeavors. Slowly, she felt her eyes closing. Snapping them open, she willed herself to stay awake. But despite her best efforts, her eyes slowly closed and sleep took her once more.

She felt the sun on her body. It was warm. It felt good. She wanted to lay there and let the heat drain the ache from her muscles. A soft rustling caught her attention. Opening her eyes, she saw Spock sit down on pillows next to her.

A sheet of soft linen had been spread over her and someone had lifted her onto several pillows, forming a soft bed. "What time is it?"

"I do not know," Spock answered. "I believe it is almost afternoon."

"When did I fall asleep?"

"Shortly before dawn."

"And it was three hours before midnight when we came up from the camp. That was one long circus," she muttered to herself. "I've got to get back to Sobutai." She looked out the garden doors. The sun was indeed almost at its zenith.

"I have brought you food and drink. Lord Turin has instructed me to care for your needs."

"How very kind of him," she drawled, taking the fruit drink that Spock handed to her. She emptied the glass and Spock refilled it. The juice seemed to revive her a bit. Spock set the plate of fruit and cheese next to her. It took her no time at all to finish the food.

"Would you like to bathe?" Spock asked her as he stood. Picking a robe up from the table, he held it up for her.

Joanna stood slowly, allowing sore muscles time to stretch. She rolled her neck as Spock put the robe on her, then led her to another door. On the other side was a large bathing pool. It was obviously Turin's private bath. Letting go of the robe, she shrugged it off her shoulders,

allowing it to float to the floor. A second later, she was sitting in the warm water. It felt good, soothing, as she leaned her head back against the side of the pool.

She felt the Vulcan's hands on her shoulders, rubbing them gently, working the knots from them. "That feels so good," she sighed as Spock continued his ministrations. Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift. Memories of the previous night played through it. The rippling of the water invaded her reverie. She felt herself being shifted in her seat.

Opening her eyes, she saw Spock, standing chest deep in the water. Moving to her, he gently took an arm and massaged it, then lifted her hand to his lips. "I am to give you whatever pleasure you wish," he told her, his voice quiet, velvety.

"This is fine, Spock."

"Lord Turin has given me instructions ..."

"What kind of instructions?"

"I am to give you pleasure."

"Well, we can just say we did," she smiled at him.

"I cannot. I must ..."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I cannot lie to Lord Turin. If I lie, he will give me to Karn for more training. I do not want to go back!"

"Spock," she reached up and touched his face. The look of fear and horror in those brown eyes tore at her heart. "It's all right. You're safe here with me. I won't let that happen to you." Taking his hands, she pulled him to her. His arms encircled her, picking her up from the seat.

He entered her slowly, stopping as he heard her sharp intake of breath. "I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you."

"You didn't," she smiled.

Spock let himself slide into her as gently as he could, with painstaking slowness. The silky warmth surrounded him as he held her to him, feeling her body against his. He did indeed feel safe with her. He wanted to stay with her, with her safety. He held her motionless for as long as he could; finally the building passion would not wait. He was in her, filling her as she filled his mind. Her presence seemed to touch his soul.

His gentleness surprised her. She could feel the extreme care he was taking so as not to cause her discomfort. This man filled her, physically and spiritually, as no one ever had. His lips felt like fire on her skin. She clung to him, wanting to be even closer than she was. His gentle rhythm washed through her, feeling for all the world like a benediction, a shared prayer for each other. This was not the savage, brutal man she shared the night with. Here was a soul of beauty open for her to drink her fill of.

Joanna allowed herself to plunge into that soul, to share herself with him. As he gave, so she gave until the final waves crashed over them, drowning them in the shared passion.

Spock held her tightly to him as he moved back to the seat. He sat her down, then joined her, pulling her to him as if seeking her comfort.

Joanna did not resist. She turned to look at the Vulcan. His eyes seemed glazed. "I'm going to get you out of here, Spock. I promise you that!" she whispered fiercely.

Spock pulled her closer in answer. He believed her.

The flap of the pavilion was open as she approached it. Sobutai must be waiting for her. Stepping into the dimness, she blinked momentarily. Her eyes burned from lack of sleep and the bright sun hadn't helped any.

"I was beginning to worry," Sobutai muttered as he gave her a quick hug. "Rough night?" he asked seeing the circles under her eyes.

"I look that bad, huh?"

"Only to someone who knows you. How about a nice warm bath?"

"Already had one."

"A massage?"

"Gods, yes! I never knew every muscle in my body could hurt like this."

She sat down and held up a booted foot. Sobutai obliged, pulling off one boot, then the other. "Turin had his people clean my clothes for me," she grinned. "I think my boots were even polished." She tossed the shirt and pants onto a chair.

"Wouldn't surprise me," Sobutai smiled. He pulled two very large, overstuffed pillows for her to lay on. "So, what happened?"

"What didn't happen," she sighed as Sobutai started rubbing her back. "Spock was wasted on the drug. Meek and subservient. Whatever Turin wanted, he did. No questions, no complaints, no balking. There were marks on his body, bruises. I don't know what Karn did, but if I ever get my hands on that sadistic bastard, I'm gonna stuff his balls down his throat!"

"Suffice it to say, Karn has his methods," Sobutai told her. "Calm down. What's done is done. We can't change the past. Think objectively!"

"Think objectively? Sobutai, I'm lucky I can think at all. Last night was incredible. The intensity of the it was staggering. It was almost as if he was ... in my ... mind." Suddenly she groaned. "Gods, Sobutai, he **was** in my mind!"

"What?"

"His shields are gone!"

"And Vulcans being ..."

"... touch telepaths ... I was getting his emotional overload, as he was getting mine. We've got to get him out of there. If this keeps up it could fry his mind."

"And there is no way he is going to get the antidote."

Joanna rolled over, looking at him. "Sobutai, I just had the greatest night of sex I ever had in my life. I did things I never dreamed of in my wildest fantasies. Spock especially. Turin revels in it. He will never give Spock the antidote!" She paused for a moment. "I promised Spock I would get him out of there."

She stopped as she heard Turin's voice outside their pavilion. Fortunately, they had been talking quietly. Sobutai quickly pulled his tunic off and laid next to Joanna.

"May I come in?" Turin inquired.

"Sure," Sobutai answered, pretending not to be pleased with the interruption. He stood as Turin walked in. Joanna rolled to her side, facing Turin, propping her head on her hand.

"Joanna, would you dine with me this evening?"

"Delighted, Turin."

"Wonderful. Two hours after trade close?"

"Two hours after trade close," she smiled.

He turned to leave, then stopped. "Oh, and bring your father." He was out the doorway, flap closing behind him before she could answer. She wasn't sure she had heard his last statement correctly.

"So do you have any ideas?" Sobutai asked her resuming their interrupted conversation. He sat down next to her.

"Not really. At this point, I can't even think straight, much less plan an escape for someone."

"Then you'd better get some rest. It's the second hour past midday."

"Yeah. I have a feeling it could be another long night."

Joanna rubbed her eyes as she sat on the edge of the bed. She had allowed herself two hours of sleep. She needed to talk to her father. If they were going to get Spock away, it had to be tonight. She rummaged in her medikit and produced a hypo. After checking the dosage, she pressed it against her leg. It was a mild stimulant. It would help her get through the evening. The dinner would be their best chance.

Nor was she going to "dress" for this dinner. She quickly pulled out black riding pants and a light blue shirt. Joanna wanted something comfortable and functional should she get the chance to get Spock out. A little voice in the back of her mind was telling her, for good or ill, it was going to be tonight. Dressing quickly, she smiled at her reflection. The last touch was the soft, supple riding boots. They had been a gift from Sobutai on their trip to M'Tarra. He had already left to take Chris to the family dinner. She was to meet her father, Sulu and Chekov to discuss the possibilities. It was almost time for them to be there. She walked into the common area and saw them waiting.

McCoy smiled as she walked into common room. "Ready?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Pavel, are you folks stationed?" Chekov nodded. "Ok, gentlemen, we're going to have to be very careful. I may be able to get Turin to loan me Spock for the evening. I know he has late night sessions with several nobles tonight. That's why we're dining so early."

"I have obtained a floor plan," Chekov said as he punched it up on his tricorder. "Our best way out will depend on where we are."

"I found some palm stuns that should work if we need them. Non-lethal, but enough to knock a person out for a while."

Joanna nodded. It was time. "Let's go. We're expected."

A few minutes walk brought them to the gate of the keep. They were admitted immediately and ushered to Turin's private salon. Joanna smiled slightly at his choice of receiving area. The room looked much the way it had before their ... activities.

"Good evening," Turin smiled, moving to her, kissing her lightly on the lips. "Doctor

McCoy, how nice of you to join us. And you two gentlemen. Welcome. I hope you've been enjoying yourselves at our little celebration."

"Marvelous time, marvelous," McCoy assured him, taking Turin's outstretched hand. "And thank you so kindly for the invitation. I hope you don't mind my bringing my men with me. I ... try to make it a practice to keep them close by."

"No problem," Turin assured him. "Well, shall we adjourn to the garden. Spock should have everything ready."

Turin held out his arm to Joanna, who took it, smiling. The three men followed them to a table in the middle of the garden. The small grove was surrounded by trees that reminded McCoy of magnolias. The fragrance of the white blossoms was delicate, pleasant. Then he saw Spock emerge from another path, carrying a bowl of fruit. His eyes met Spock's, but the Vulcan seemed to take no notice of him. Well, Joanna had warned him.

Sulu and Chekov exchanged glances as they saw the Vulcan. McCoy had briefed them on his conversation with Joanna.

"You may serve," Turin instructed Spock when they had been seated.

The food was excellent. The flavor of each dish complimented the other. Red berries exploded with flavor as they were bitten into. The meat was delicately seasoned. All, including the service, was perfection. Turin clearly intended to impress his guests.

Chekov watched Spock as he moved around the table, serving the food or drink. Occasionally he would join in the conversation, but usually only when spoken to directly. Turin noticed his looks.

"He is a beauty, isn't he?"

"Hm? Oh, I am sorry. I did not hear you," Chekov lied.

"My servant. Is he not the most exotic creature you have ever seen?"

Chekov smiled. He hardly thought of Spock as exotic. The choice of words amused him. "That is an ... interesting description," he replied.

"Of course he has been thoroughly trained," Turin continued. "Anything that is required by his master. Isn't that right Spock?"

"Yes, My Lord," Spock replied, stopping by Turin's chair.

Joanna continued eating, watching the interplay closely. So far, Chekov was handling things well. She saw her father shifting slightly in his chair. McCoy was clearly not comfortable with this conversation. Sulu remained inscrutable, as if nothing ever fazed him. During the meal, Spock had occasionally glanced in her direction. When she saw it, she had smiled at him. She could feel the tension building as the conversation continued.

"An interesting specimen," Chekov replied to Turin's last remark. "Do you know where he's from?"

"A runaway slave," Turin shrugged. "If you're interested, I could offer you his services for the evening. He is extremely competent in the ways of the soul."

"Ways of the soul?" Chekov asked, not sure what Turin was talking about.

"Ah ... Sexual activities," Turin clarified. "Here they are known as ways of the soul."

"I see," Chekov said. "That ..." The Russian never got to finish.

McCoy suddenly erupted from his seat, fist flying through the air. He had heard enough.

This was the final insult. Joanna had told him, but he refused to believe it until now. The blow connected squarely with Turin's chin, dropping the Teronian.

"Great!" Joanna rubbed her hand over her face. "Beautiful, Dad. Didn't you hear?"

"I heard!!"

"No, Dad. Turin just handed us Spock on a silver platter. We could have walked out of here with him, no strings, no problems. Now, we have a big problem! Shit!" She looked around the garden. A row of low shrubs divided the clearing from the paths around it. "Sulu, Chekov, take Turin and put him under those bushes. Let's buy ourselves a little time." She saw McCoy bend over Turin's body with a hypospray. "What are you doing?"

"Little extra insurance," he murmured as the spray hissed. "That should keep him out a while longer."

"What's going on here?"

Joanna turned at the sound of Karn's cold voice. "Well, Karn. How nice of you to drop in."

"I want an answer."

"There was a little ... misunderstanding," Joanna smiled.

"Take your hands off Lord Turin!" Karn ordered Sulu and Chekov. When the two men didn't obey, he moved toward them. Joanna stepped to block his path. "Out of the way, bitch!"

"No. You're not going near those men."

"And you plan to stop me?" Karn laughed.

"Damn right!" Joanna's right hand lashed out, connecting with Karn's face. The crunch of cartilage was audible and Karn's nose disintegrated under her blow. "That was for calling me a bitch!" A left followed the right, whipping Karn's head around. "That was for pissing me off." Her right leg followed in a roundhouse kick that send Karn flying backward. The Teonian landed with a sickening thud on the stone path. "That was for what you did to Spock, you son-of-a-bitch!"

"Where'd you learn that?" McCoy asked, awe in his voice.

"Great Aunt Lulabelle," Joanna answered, grinning. It felt good to release some of the anger she had pent up inside.

"Great Aunt Lulabelle?" McCoy echoed, not quite sure he had heard her right.

"Yeah. She always told me if I hit someone, make sure they don't get back up, 'cause if they do, they'll be real pissed. I think you'd better hit him, too, Dad."

McCoy walked over to Karn and looked at the damage Joanna had done to him. "Christ, girl, you've practically rearranged his face! I've got to give him something to stop that bleeding or he'll choke!"

"Make it fast. We've got to get moving!"

McCoy worked quickly. Seconds later, Sulu and Chekov had both men under the shrubs. "Make sure you lay that one on his side. There still may be some drainage." They rolled Karn onto his side as instructed, then straightened. "Now what?"

"There's a doorway through that line of trees back there and a path that leads to the ruins. I have a tracking beacon Sobutai gave me. He'll pick us up."

"Let's go," Sulu ordered, starting off.

Joanna felt a hand on her arm. Turning, she saw Spock, fear in his eyes. "Please take me with you. He will give me back to Karn ..."

Smiling reassurance, she took the Vulcan's hand and led him after the others. Minutes later they were making their way up the cliff path. Then, after what seemed forever in the darkness the deeper black of the ruins loomed ahead of them on the plateau. Taking the beacon out, Joanna activated it, clipping it onto the waist of her pants.

"That's the signal!" Sobutai told Chris as he powered Traveller up. "They got Spock."
"Great!"

"Just another couple of minutes and we're out of here."

"Soldiers," whispered Chekov.

Quietly the group moved to the larger building. From the noise the patrol was making, it didn't seem they were searching for the fugitives. But it still would not do any good to be caught up here. Especially since this place was considered off limits. They slipped quietly through the doorway of the building.

No sooner had they entered then they were startled by the door sliding shut behind them, closing them off from the outside world.

"Terrific!" sighed McCoy, scowling at the door.

"At least it's not dark in here," Sulu commented, looking around. The walls of the building were reddish brown with glossy black lines depicting either pictures or writing. He moved closer to inspect their design when a muttered exclamation from Chekov caused him to turn.

"The door, it won't open. There are no controls in here to open it!"

"Hmm! Evidently the door wasn't intended to be opened from this side," Sulu said calmly.

McCoy looked at him in disgust. "So how do you suggest we get out?"

Sulu looked at the Doctor, then turned once more to look at the strange markings. "I think this may be our way out. Look at these markings." He pointed to a set of lines, then began tracing one with his finger. "This part here looks like this building we're in now and what this area could look like if it wasn't in ruins. This path goes thru the cliff and out into the flatlands beyond."

"Even if that's true, where's the door? How do we get out?"

Sulu frowned. "I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe ..." He broke off, startled, as the wall behind Spock and Joanna dissolved into a black rectangle. Joanna's head whiped around to look. She'd been following the conversation with interest. She had heard rumors....

"That's it, that's the door," she said, peering into the blackness. "There's steps leading down, like in the picture. Come on," she urged, stepping thru and motioning the others to follow. Spock moved obediently forward to her side and stopped, waiting with her for the others to follow.

"Now just hold on there!" McCoy demanded, looking at his daughter as if she had suddenly sprouted a second head. "How do you know it's not just another trap?"

"What do you suggest, Dad? That we wait here and see if the other door decides to open

again?" Joanna asked sceptically.

"I don't like it," McCoy grumbled, approaching the opening cautiously. He stared into the blackness for a moment and then as his eyes adjusted, realized it wasn't completely dark. Somewhere ahead was a dim light. With a glare at his daughter, he stepped through the opening, closely followed by Sulu and Chekov.

They found a set of steeply sloping steps leading down into the murk. They were advancing slowly when Chekov's startled exclamation caused them to turn around and look at the wall behind them. The open doorway slowly turned to mist, then once more became a solid wall. McCoy's glare grew. So did the light.

"It's the plants," Sulu announced from slightly ahead in answer to an inquiry from Chekov. He was examining the patches glowing on the walls and ceiling. "These growths seem to contain a phosphorescent property which is apparently stimulated by our presence causing an increase in their luminescence."

"I think you're contaminating him Spock," McCoy said disgustedly. "He's beginning to sound just like you." For a moment, McCoy thought he saw a spark of something, some kind of reaction to their usual bantering, and then it was gone to be replaced once more by that look of ... what? Uneasiness? Fear? McCoy couldn't decide.

"Who cares how they work!" Chekov declared. "I for one do not wish to go wandering around through this funhouse in the dark!"

"Botany's one of my favorite hobbies," Sulu reminded them. "I've seen plants like these before. And if this place is anything like the caverns on ..." he trailed off, his thoughts going off to some private place as he continued leading them through the passageway. The steps gave way to a steeply sloping ramp continuing on down into the murk. A dank smell rose from beyond in a draft. They went on, the damp increasing until the air seemed foggy. The moisture was becoming increasingly warm and odorous with a musky taint, hinting of life ahead. Sulu muttered something as he moved on ahead, followed closely by the others.

"What was that?" McCoy inquired as he moved up by Sulu.

"I said that it seems rather strange that the air is so warm. It should be getting cooler," Sulu replied, puzzlement in his voice.

"Too bad it isn't getting drier too," Joanna remarked.

"Well?" McCoy demanded.

Sulu shrugged. "This isn't exactly my area of expertise," he apologized.

"What about those caverns you were talking about earlier?" Chekov asked in a low voice, moving up to take McCoy's place as the Doctor dropped back to converse with his daughter. He eyed Spock who was walking docilely by her side. She returned McCoy's raised eyebrow with a slight grin.

"I was more interested in the plants than in the caverns themselves," Sulu admitted, "and my guide. She was an expert." A reminiscent smile lit his face and Chekov grinned at him.

"Do you think we'll find food and water in this place or is that too much to hope for?" McCoy grumbled loudly.

Before Sulu could answer, the passageway was leveling off, opening into a large cavern which held a lake of oily ill-smelling water. He and Chekov walked over to the edge and tried to

peer into the murky depths as McCoy glared around the cavern.

"I thought you said this was the way out, Sulu. I don't see any other openings ... What the hell is that?" McCoy's attention was drawn to the lake where something peculiar was happening. Coming up behind Chekov, he watched as the water bubbled and splashed over the walkway beneath their feet. A stange humming filled the cavern, then a huge creature surfaced.

"Look out!" McCoy yelled, instinctively grabbing Chekov and jerking him back away from the edge, toppling them both off balance.

Sulu and Joanna slowly moved back from the edge of the lake toward the two men on the ground, not taking their eyes off the creature as they did so. It turned its sightless face toward them, moving its head as if seeking them and they froze; then after a few moments, it gave a grunt and sank below the surface. A few more waves and the water was still again. Breaths that had been held were released and hands reached down to help the two men to their feet.

"What was that?" McCoy asked shakily, rubbing his back where he'd fallen against a piece of stone sticking up from the floor.

"If it comes back, I'll ask it," Joanna said drily as she turned toward her father. "Dad, of all the ..." She broke off as she caught sight of McCoy's expression. "Never mind. Here, let me check you." Lifting his tunic, she examined the rapidly bruising area on his back. "Just bruised. You'll be sore, but you'll live."

"Hmpf!" was all McCoy said as he turned to Chekov. "You hurt?"

Chekov shook his head vigorously.

"Good! Sorry. That ... creature ... startled me."

"I think we'd better go on," Sulu said. Motioning around the lake he continued, "We'll keep following this path, see if it leads to the way out."

They followed the path, skirting their way around the rest of the lake, McCoy constantly looking back over his shoulder at the smooth surface until they came to another dark opening in the wall. The walkway continued on for a short distance to a large opening in the rock. The water from the lake moved sluggishly through it.

"This leads further underground," Chekov announced, peering into the first opening.

"Since we don't have a boat and I have no intention of swimming in that, it looks like we go the long way," Joanna announced, looking disgustedly at the oily flow.

McCoy sighed, but having no wish to swim in the murky liquid either, made no protest as he followed the others through the smaller opening. The tunnel floor sloped downward, soon descending so steeply that steps were cut into it. The walls narrowed so it felt as if the passage was pressing in on them. They increased their pace, anxious to be out of the confining tunnel.

Finally they came to the end of the passage, stepping out into a vast underground cavern to spot what at first looked like a gleaming white cluster of pillars with strange looking tops. They stood for a moment, then with Sulu and Chekov leading the way, they moved forward, crossing an open space of gray soil along which ran a clear stream. The water disappeared among the pillars. Closer examination proved them to be giant plants. Sulu uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as they followed the stream, coming to an open area among the plants, covered with a soft mosslike plant surrounding several large pools of water.

"The water will be safe to drink," Sulu said, stroking one of the plants. "We can get food

from them too if you're still hungry, Doc."

"How do you know that?" McCoy asked.

"Kira plants always grow near pools of water. Something in the root system purifies the water, making it safe for most humanoids to drink. They provide food, clothing, shelter, fuel, utensils ... kind of like an all-purpose plant. Something else I learned on my trip through the caves." He winked at Chekov. "The bark comes off in strips and makes wonderfully soft bedding. This would be a good place to make camp."

"What are you talking about?" McCoy snapped. "We've got to get out of here. We can't stop to make camp."

"Sulu's right, Dad. In case you haven't noticed, it is starting to get dark. I think your lighting system is going to sleep," Joanna remarked sardonically.

McCoy drew in a sharp breath, then let it out slowly without making a reply. He glanced at Spock, then at Joanna who shrugged and grimaced. "I know, but I don't see what else we can do."

"All right," he sighed.

Sulu began pulling sheets of 'bark' from the plant closest to him. "Pick up those things that look like pine cones," he directed Chekov. "We can use them to make the fire." They worked quickly and soon Sulu turned from the pile he had made to show Chekov how to pull the center stem with a quick tug, thereby causing the cone to ignite. He placed it in the stone circle Joanna and her father had prepared and soon had a comfortable fire going. He reached up and pulled down several fat globes that were hanging from the mushroom shaped top of the plant. Breaking them open, he scooped out the contents onto one of the bark pieces. He filled the shells with water from one of the pools, then carefully set them along the edge of the fire to heat. After a few minutes he slipped the contents he'd removed earlier back into the now simmering water.

McCoy began examining one of the pools and discovered it contained water warm enough to bathe in but not uncomfortably hot. The pool was almost hidden from the clearing by a cluster of smaller kira plants which had grown especially close together and would afford some privacy for the bathers. He came back to the others and announced his find, then began to gather some of the fuel cones and placed them in a pile in a small cleared area close to the pool. Igniting them as he had seen Sulu do, he returned to the group. "I'm going to take a soak before I eat." He looked at the Vulcan, hesitated, then went on. "Come on, Spock, the water'll probably do you good."

A faint look of alarm crossed the Vulcan's face but he got up obediently and went with the Doctor. Joanna watched as the two disappeared around the concealing trees. She sat looking at the fire for a moment more, then rose to her feet. "I think I'll join them if you don't mind?"

"Go ahead," Sulu acknowledged, distractedly, adding something more to the containers. "It'll be awhile before these are done. Pavel and I will watch them."

Chekov grinned and without missing a beat, added, "Watch out for our huge friend. Who knows where he might turn up again."

"And ruin Dad's 'soak'? He wouldn't dare!" Joanna grinned back at the two men. "Just make sure you save the rest of us some, Pav," she cautioned as she went to join Spock and her father.

Spock had quickly stripped off his clothing, then moved to assist McCoy. Reaching for the fastenings of the Doctor's tunic, he was startled when his hands were abruptly shoved away. He froze, staring at the Doctor in wide-eyed panic.

"What do you think you're doing?" McCoy blurted in astonishment.

"You requested that I accompany you ..." Spock faltered, confused. "I thought ... do you not wish to pleasure yourself with me?" he asked plaintively.

"Good lord, Spock, what the devil gave you that idea?" McCoy rasped.

"It's what he was trained for, Dad," Joanna remarked, joining them. "You know what Turin told you. He's only doing what he thinks is expected of him."

"But this is Spock, not some ... some ...!" McCoy sputtered.

"I know," Joanna sighed. "It's all right, Spock," she said, turning to the Vulcan. "Go ahead, get in the water. No one's angry at you."

Relieved, Spock obeyed, slipping quickly into the pool. McCoy's eyes followed him with concern, then snapped back to Joanna. He frowned as he saw she was removing her garments.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Missy?" he demanded.

"Takin' a soak," she drawled, sliding into the pool beside Spock. "Come on in. The water feels wonderful!"

"Well turn your back," he growled, starting to undo his tunic.

"I'm a doctor," she grinned, amused at his modesty.

"I've used that line myself," McCoy shot back. "Now turn around!" She did as she was told this time and he was soon with the others in the pool. He noticed that Spock was leaning back against the side of the pool, his eyes closed and McCoy realized that the Vulcan had dozed off. Worried evident on his face, he turned to his daughter.

"That drug Turin gave him, how long before it starts to wear off? How much time do you think we're gonna have to get out of this funhouse?"

"I don't really know," Joanna admitted. "According to Sobutai, it's usually only given in small doses and the antidotes given shortly after, at least within several hours. Spock got it straight, at least two full glasses that I saw, and I don't know how much more besides. And he's obviously had none of the antidote. It's addicting. I don't know how his system will react without it. He may process it out, he may have a serious withdrawal. Or, it could be somewhere in between. I don't know."

"So we wait," McCoy surmised. "You didn't say anything about those bruises," he accused, his thoughts suddenly going off in another direction.

"That's some of Karn's handiwork," Joanna said bitterly. "Turin said he wanted Spock broken and he couldn't have hoped for better results. I wasn't given any of the details and I'd really rather not know." She looked as if she'd gotten a taste of something rotten just then. "Karn's a real cold bastard," she went on, "and would do anything for Turin, no matter what it took." She sighed and shook her head as if clearing it. "I checked him out yesterday when I visited Turin. The bruises look bad, but other than that damn drug in his system, physically he's not in too bad shape. It's the damage to his mind I'm really worried about."

"And there's no way of telling that till the drug's out of his system," McCoy sighed.

"Exactly," Joanna confirmed. "I think I've had enough of this water," she said suddenly.

"I'm starving. All this excitement's given me an appetite."

"Just a minute. Were you really going to leave Karn like that?"

"After what he did to Spock? You're damn right!" She looked over at Spock and her expression softened. "It's something I learned on the border. You never leave an enemy to attack you a second time."

McCoy shook his head, then turned to rouse the sleeping Vulcan.

Spock started up, a look of pure terror on his face. He relaxed when Joanna spoke to him, telling him it was time to eat. He followed the others from the pool, taking up a piece of the bark to dry himself.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" McCoy growled, suddenly aware that Joanna was looking him over. He flushed a dull red and clutched the piece of bark he was holding protectively in front of him.

"You've lost weight again," she stated calmly, continuing her appraisal. "And, you've been working out. Very good," she remarked approvingly.

"Jim got me into one of his blasted poker games," McCoy grumbled, finishing drying himself off and reaching for his clothing. "He bet me a month of workouts with him and Spock in the ship's gym if I lost. I think they cheated!"

Joanna laughed. "They must have to beat you. Hurry up, Spock," she said to the Vulcan who had just been standing there for the last few minutes, listening to the conversation going on beside him. Visions of the last bath he and Joanna had shared flashed through his mind and he longed to reach out and touch her. He sighed and finished dressing quickly, unwilling to chance making another mistake and getting them angry.

"I hope you left us something," McCoy called as he and the others rejoined the two by the fire. He peered at the empty shells lying by the fire and sighed. "Spock fell asleep and we had the devil of a time waking him up. And now the food's gone."

"Help yourself, Doc," Sulu said, waving at several containers on the edge of the fire. "They were getting cold, so I put them back to reheat."

McCoy nodded and knelt by the fire. "You two run along now and get your swim. Who knows how long it'll be before we get another chance."

"Always the optimist, aren't you Dad," Joanna sighed, joining him by the fire. She held a warmed shell out to Spock, wrapped in another piece of the all-purpose plant bark. He took it, folding gracefully to the ground beside her, and began to eat.

"Well at least he has an appetite," McCoy murmured to Joanna.

"This is quite good," Spock answered approvingly, his Vulcan hearing having caught the Doctor's low voiced comment. He looked up, suddenly apprehensive. "I beg forgiveness. I should not have intruded on your conversation," he said.

McCoy stared at the Vulcan open mouthed, ready to come back with a sarcastic reply, when he realized the Vulcan was serious. *'Damn,'* he thought for the umpteenth time since they'd taken the Vulcan from the Teronian's hands, *'what did they do to you Spock?'*

"It's all right," McCoy found himself repeating. "It is good. You may have another if you like."

"Thank you. That is most kind." He reached for another of the filled containers, oblivious to the concerned stares of the others. He finished off that one too, then taking the bark pieces

indicated by Joanna, he laid them out carefully on the ground. Stretching out, he kept glancing at Joanna as if to reassure himself that she was still there. She and McCoy laid their own bedding out, then returned to the fire where they conversed in low whispers. Spock did not try to follow the conversation, content to know Joanna was close by. Sulu and Chekov returned, joining in the conversation. Eventually they too laid out piles of bedding and lay down. Joanna soon followed, falling instantly asleep. McCoy fed the fire with a few more of the 'pine cones,' then stood up. He gazed out into the dark, then slowly began to walk, looking around. Spock watched him for a few moments, then closed his eyes and slept.

After awhile McCoy woke Chekov and settled into his bedding. He lay awake for awhile, thinking about the events of the last two days. They needed to get Spock to the *Enterprise* soon. He hoped Chris had been successful with her temple friend. He realized that his worrying was getting him nowhere and he was starting to get a headache. He closed his eyes, and using a technique he'd learned, soon put himself to sleep.

Chekov walked around the clearing, looking out into the depths of the plant forest as far as the torch he carried shed its light. He picked up several more of the fuel cones, tossing them on the pile by the fire. He noticed that Spock was moving restlessly and he wondered for a moment if he should waken the Vulcan. His attention was then drawn to Joanna; she was mumbling and moving in her sleep as if trying to fend off an attack. Chekov started toward her. She rolled over and quieted. Spock, too, quieted and he sat down, staring into the fire. He jumped, startled, when Spock cried out, then broke into sobs. Chekov stood and went over to him, staring at the Vulcan in dismay. Kneeling down, he looked at him doubtfully, wondering again whether to wake him. Or perhaps he should wake McCoy, let him handle it. After all, the manual doesn't say what your perfect officer does when a superior ... But before he could make up his mind, a tear slid down the Vulcan's cheek and the Russian's natural instincts came into play. He gathered the Vulcan into his arms, cradling him gently as he murmured soothing, comforting words.

Spock came up from the depths of the dream, aware of being gently held in strong arms. He opened his eyes to see Chekov staring down at him in concern. He leaned into the warmth, the nearness of the body holding him. Rising desire quickly replaced the lingering remnants of horror from the nightmare that had driven him from sleep.

Chekov wondered briefly why Spock made no effort to move away now that he was awake. And then a delicious warmth spreading through his body made him no more eager than the Vulcan to end the embrace.

Spock pulled away slightly. Sitting up, he leaned toward Chekov, his cheek coming next to the Russian's. "How may I pleasure you?" he whispered, kissing Chekov's cheek.

For a second, Chekov didn't move. Spock's actions had stunned him. "Bozhe moi!" he gasped, staring at Spock. Chekov broke away and was on his feet, starting to back away.

Spock stared at him, fear surging forward. He had made another mistake. Turin would surely send him back to Karn. "Please ... I did not mean to offend. Tell me what you wish of me!"

Chekov shook his head as if clearing it. The palpable fear on Spock's face broke through his own shock. "No, no. It's all right, Mr. Spock."

"I cannot go back to Karn. Do not let Lord Turin send me back to Karn! Please ... He

hurts me ..." Spock crawled to Chekov on his knees, grabbing the Russian's legs. "Please ... Do not tell Lord Turin!" he sobbed. He started looking around frantically. "I must find her! She promised I would be safe!"

"Mr. Spock, listen to me." Chekov dropped to his knees, grabbing each of Spock's arms. "It's all right! You **are** safe! Turin will not send you anywhere! He is not here! Karn is not here! Calm down! You've done nothing wrong!"

The last statement seeped through Spock's mounting hysteria. Slowly the Vulcan sat back on his heels. "You will not tell?"

"No, Mr. Spock, I will not tell." Chekov breathed a sigh of relief as Spock visibly began to calm.

"Is she here? She said I would be safe," Spock asked Chekov.

"Huh?" Chekov looked puzzled. Looking past the Vulcan, he suddenly understood.

"Yes, Mr. Spock. She's over there, asleep. Maybe you'd like to get some sleep, too?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Chekov watched, worry and concern boiling through his mind as he watched Spock settle. He had not resolved his worries when it was time for Sulu to take watch.

The plants were growing brighter. One by one, Sulu woke the sleepers. He had already put more of the plant stew on to heat. It hadn't taken the group long to straighten up the campsite. They found that Sulu had been busy during his watch. He had fashioned carrying bags from the plant bark and fitted them with hollowed out plant pods. Stoppers for the openings in the pods had been fashioned from more of the bark. These they filled with water, then added several plant pods and pine cones to separate bags. Prepared, they started on their day's march.

They followed the path along the stream, away from the pillar-like plants toward what looked like the walls of a gleaming, white city. On closer examination, they saw that the 'city walls' were growing out of the ground - a slimy, moist fungus. Sulu exclaimed in delight as he looked the 'walls' over "This is marvelous. It's fairly thick, but gives when you push on it."

"How can you stand to touch the stuff?" Chekov asked watching Sulu disgustedly.

"No worse than some of the borscht you've had me eat," Sulu returned.

Contented for the moment, Sulu led the group around the growths. The path suddenly ended as the stream disappeared through a small hole in the wall. Beside it a larger opening contained steps that went above their head. As they started up, they could see another opening. Going through, their path narrowed into a rough passage that sloped gently upward.

"Thank goodness," McCoy sighed. "We're finally going in the right direction. This has to go to the surface. I can't wait to get a whiff of fresh air."

"We're not out of here, yet, Dad," Joanna murmured as she followed him.

"Don't remind me!" McCoy snapped irritably.

As they progressed, the passage grew rougher. The floor buckled and dropped as if it had been pushed together, then pulled apart with a half-hearted attempt to straighten it out. The air was heavy with the odor of decay. It was with a great deal of relief that they saw an opening; beyond it was what looked like daylight.

"See, there's the opening to the outside. At last!" McCoy said, as he started toward it.

"Wait!" Sulu's sharp command brought him up short. "There's something there, on the opening. It looks like a kind of grating."

The group moved cautiously forward and studied the odd looking mesh.

"What do you suppose it is?" Chekov tentatively reached out to touch it, then drew quickly back.

"And you complain about me touching plants," Sulu muttered.

Chekov searched the ground, finding the remains of an old torch. The mesh gave way to his downward slash. Carefully, Chekov moved to the opening, back against the wall as if preparing to meet an enemy on the other side of the doorway. Peering cautiously around the corner, he saw nothing then stepped through. The others followed him. Light filtered down from the roof in an approximation of daylight and there was a matted tangle of vegetation with brilliant flowers adding dashes of color on the floor.

"Damnedest stuff I ever saw," McCoy muttered as he looked at the chaotic growth. "Looks like we have to go through that."

"Looks like," Sulu agreed.

They began pushing through the vegetation, following a small, overgrown path. It was almost impossible to breathe as the heat and humidity rose. They soon found themselves surrounded by huge tubular plants with with six foot leaves and twisting, snake-like branches.

"Shh ... do you hear that? Sounds like somethin's movin'" Joanna cautioned, stopping abruptly.

"We've got to move, fast!" Sulu ordered, grabbing her arm.

"What is it," Chekov asked, following the lead pair.

"That noise. I think it's the plants. *They're* what's moving."

The rustling grew louder as green vines twisted toward them, tangling about their arms and legs. McCoy cursed fluently as he struggled to get loose from a leafy vine that had twisted around his leg. Chekov was there immediately and tore at the vine with his hands. To his surprise, it broke off rather easily.

"Let's go!" Chekov yelled.

"Where's Spock?!" McCoy shouted back. The two men looked around and spotted the Vulcan struggling, vines twining about his arms and legs.

"NO! NO! No more! I will obey. Do not punish me!" Spock's voice was taking on an hysterical edge.

Chekov and McCoy quickly dashed back to the Vulcan. Spock's thrashing made it difficult for them to break the vines, but they finally managed. Running full speed, the raving Vulcan between them, they caught up with Joanna and Sulu.

With a last burst of effort, they broke through the brush and found themselves in a large open space. Down the middle ran a line of evenly spaced poles. There was no other path; they could not avoid them. Yet they seemed to serve no purpose, afforded no protection for there was open space between them. They approached it cautiously. Sulu held out his pack, passing it between the poles without effort. He frowned as he stepped back. "There's no apparent force field," he said slowly. "And I really don't see any other way."

"Well, let's go then," Chekov said, taking a step forward. Before the others could stop him he had crossed between the poles. He winced, bending over, then slowly straightened. "Sonics," he identified, grimacing. "I'm all right. It is just a bit of shock at first."

"Damn!" Joanna muttered. She hated those things. She stepped forward, followed by the others. They staggered, affected by the piercing noise, feeling the vibration throughout their bodies.

Spock alone crumpled to the ground, hands vainly covering his ears. He lay unmoving as Joanna and her father went to him.

McCoy wondered briefly what the barrier was supposed to keep out. He hoped whatever it was, it was still on the other side. Then his attention was claimed as Spock groaned and opened his eyes. The Vulcan moved stiffly, pushing himself up. He couldn't make it to his feet; the first attempt sent his head whirling.

"Sit still a moment," McCoy cautioned. "You were hit pretty hard by that thing." He and Joanna sat down next to the Vulcan, joined shortly by Chekov and Sulu.

"That was set to stun, not kill," Sulu said slowly, examining the barrier from where he sat.

"I wonder what it was supposed to stun?" Chekov muttered, looking uneasily over his shoulder.

"Whatever it is, I hope it isn't still around," McCoy voiced his earlier thought out loud.

"I don't want to stay and find out," Joanna said as she got to her feet. The others followed, Spock swaying unsteadily. Joanna put out a hand to steady him. Once he was squarely on his feet, she started off. Spock followed, trying to ignore the dizziness that threatened to overtake him.

They moved along the path, Sulu again taking the lead. The landscape was featureless, flat. Here and there rocks jutted up from the gravelly floor. The air was dry. There was no noise, no sound but their feet crunching in the rock particles under them. They sipped water sparingly as they marched. Fresh water was a precious commodity in caves and there was no telling when, or if, they would come across another stream or lake that was palatable. Time dragged on. It seemed as though they crossed the same dismal section of floor again and again. Nothing broke the bleak monotony of the trek.

"There seems to be something up ahead," Sulu called.

The others raised their eyes. They could see it now. To the side of their path there seemed to be a large bump on the floor. As they got closer, it looked like someone had taken giant boulders and smashed them together. Nearing it, they finally saw how large the hump was.

Sulu motioned for the others to stay. Dropping his pack, he headed for what appeared to be an opening in the boulders. The light had started to dim as he vanished inside. A couple minutes later, he motioned for the rest to enter.

Inside, the walls of the room were smooth. Here and there, strange glyphs and symbols were etched into the stone. It was large enough for the group to camp comfortably for the night.

McCoy sank to his knees. He was tired. Oddly, though, he wasn't as tired as he thought he would be. Maybe those workout sessions were paying off after all. He looked over at Spock. The Vulcan stood, blinking as if sleep threatened to overwhelm him. "Sit down, Spock," McCoy said gently. The Vulcan obeyed.

Their camp was soon set up. Each lounged around the small fire, waiting for the stew to finish cooking. Joanna stretched her tired muscles, laying on her bedding, hands behind her head. She stared at the ceiling, looking at nothing in particular. She hadn't slept well last night. Dreams kept invading her slumber. She was so tired. She just wanted the dreams to stop. "Hey, I've found something," Chekov called excitedly. He had gone wandering around the room after their meal. Sulu and McCoy joined him. Joanna started to, but decided she didn't want to expend the effort it would take, she was that tired. Spock sat by the fire, seemingly mesmerized by the dancing flames.

The three men came back with armloads of stuff. Putting their booty on the ground, they sorted through it, dividing it.

"What ya got?" Joanna asked, turning on her side.

"All kinds of stuff," Sulu answered. "Looks like rations of some kind. Smells good," he commented after sniffing a brown colored bar. "Knives and short swords. I think they'll be good to have if we run into any more of those vines. Better water containers. Kinda look like the wine skins of Boros. A hand held light, cooking utensils, back packs. Mostly the food stuff. We brought a knife and sword for each of us. There were blankets there, but I figured we didn't need them since we have the stuff from the plants. It's works as well and folds up smaller. Less cumbersome to carry."

"Sounds good to me," Joanna agreed. At this point, she didn't think she could carry herself, much less a pack full of blankets. She soon drifted off to the sound of the others talking.

The grey-silver wall disintegrated. It tore through the Sickbay, shredding everyone in it's path. The force of the blast hurled her into the opposite wall as she flew through the door. Pain seared into her ...

Joanna sat bolt upright, sweat running down her face, her body. Her sweat soaked shirt clung to her. Breath came in ragged gasps as she tried to calm herself. Dropping her head forward into her hands, she groaned. The dream had been so vivid. That dark pit opened, threatening to wash over her. Shaking her head, she stood up, pushing the pit back into the fringes of her mind.

"You all right?" Sulu asked coming up to her.

Joanna nodded. "Dream."

"Want to talk?"

"No. It doesn't help. I've talked to shrinks 'til I'm blue in the face. All they tell me is the dreams will go away in time. When the conflicts are resolved," she added sarcastically. "You know, time heals all wounds."

"I guess it does. I don't really know," Sulu shrugged. "I've never had to deal with anything like that."

"I hope to hell you never have to," Joanna told him. "I watched all my friends die that day. Funny, but you never know how you'll react when your world crashes into a million little pieces."

Sulu looked at her sympathetically. *Enterprise* learned about Pinniok mere hours after the

ambush. He remembered it well. He was at the helm when Uhura's shocked voice passed the message onto Kirk. The entire bridge had lapsed into stunned silence. *Ranger* had been the Border Patrol's equivalent to *Enterprise*. If it could happen to them ...

Sulu nodded and resumed his walking. Joanna moved to one of the walls of the chamber. Leaning against it, she closed her eyes, then let her knees buckle under her. The coolness of the stone felt good. It helped clear her mind.

Sounds of whimpering broke into her thoughts. Her eyes snapped open as she identified where the sound was coming from. Instantly she was next to the Vulcan who lay twisted in his bedding.

"Spock ... Spock, wake up. It's only a dream," she reached out, touching his shoulder. Vivid images and pain whipped through her. Biting back a cry, she shook Spock's shoulder. "Spock! Wake up!"

With a convulsive shiver he sat up, then looked at her. His eyes were haunted. And she understood. She had gotten enough of the backlash to know. "I ... It ..." he stammered.

"Shhh. It's all right." She gathered him in her arms, gently stroking his hair as if he were a frightened child. After a few seconds, she felt him start to relax.

The gentle rocking motion, the warmth of her next to him, the comfort he felt from her quickly evaporated the remaining dream images. And he felt a little ashamed. After what he had done with and to this woman ... For her to even want to be near him surprised him.

He clung to her, half afraid this was another dream, half afraid it wasn't. "It's all right, Spock. You're safe with me. Remember the garden?" Spock nodded his head. "Remember what I did to Karn?" Again he nodded. "I'd do it again ... and more," she whispered. "He will *never* hurt you again!"

Slowly, Spock moved from her embrace. "I am better. Thank you." With a sigh, he stood. Joanna looked up at him questioningly. "I have no wish for further sleep."

"Want some company?"

"That ... would be nice."

They moved to a far corner of the room so they would not disturb their companions. Sulu glanced back at them to be sure everything was all right, then resumed his own thinking.

They sat for a while in silence. The presence of the other comforting each. "Why do you not hate me?" Spock suddenly asked.

"Why should I?"

"The other night ... in the salon. I ... It ..." He took a deep breath. "I was not gentle or considerate of you. I know I hurt you."

Joanna looked at him, surprised. "You remember?" Spock nodded. "You remember everything? The dream you had tonight was not your subconscious replaying what happened?"

"I remember," Spock said, hanging his head. "I am ashamed."

"Whoa! Let's get a couple of things straight. First," she held up one finger, "you didn't have a choice. The drug takes away your control. Wipes inhibitions or defenses right out. Second, let us not forget I was an all too willing participant the other night. You did not hurt me. And everything I did was because I wanted to."

"It was most ..."

"Pleasurable?" she finished for him.

"Yes."

Silence fell between them once again. Joanna lay her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. She wanted to sleep. But if she did, she knew the dreams would come again. That was a horror she did not want to relive. At least not tonight.

"Why did you come with me?" she asked Spock, eyes still closed.

"I felt safe with you. That morning, in the bathing pool, it was as if I knew you would not harm me. It was a reassurance, an affirmation, if you will, from you."

"What do you mean?"

"You did not have to protect me the way you did. You could have refused, left me to Turin's mercy. But you did not. That in itself, spoke volumes."

"You're starting to feel better, aren't you." It was more a statement than a question.

"My head is clearing. Thoughts are no longer muddled and disjointed."

"What was it like? The drug's effect?"

"It made me feel ... Jim once told me how he felt after he had consumed an excessive quantity of alcohol at the Academy. He remembered what happened, but seemed to have no control over the situation. I have never understood until now what he meant."

"I understand. I've been that way myself a few times." Joanna rolled her head to one side and opened her eyes. She watched his profile for a few minutes, then turned her head forward again. "How did you get down there in the first place?"

"Orders."

"From who?"

"Admiral Komack."

"The question why comes to mind," she drawled.

"We were to meet with someone. That's really all I know."

"Which means it's really all Jim knew."

Spock looked down at his hands. "Why did they not come for me?"

"Well, near as I can figure out from what Dad said, they were getting ready to go back for you when they got a distress call from a disabled freighter. Jim was hurt very badly chasing after you. He fell and fractured his skull. He's fine now," she assured Spock. "Then they started to head back again and got called in for refit. Dad said they couldn't reschedule."

"That would explain the lack of a rescue attempt until now."

"Well, they eventually did get someone here," she gestured to the three men in front of them. "Maybe not the cavalry on white horses, but a rescue party all the same."

Spock nodded. "I am grateful that they came. And I am also grateful for all you have done."

Joanna raised her head from its resting place and looked at him sardonically. "Why?"

"You compromised yourself for me."

"What makes you think I did it all for your sake. Maybe, in a way, I was doing it for me," she asked tiredly.

"You would not dishonor yourself so," Spock answered calmly.

Go ahead and give me high ideals. I was drugged too, and, damn it, I wanted you. I still

do! And I don't know why ... Joanna leaned her head back against the wall, eyes closed. Once again silence fell between them. Neither moved or stirred. They became aware of each other's breathing as the minutes passed.

"You are sure I didn't hurt you?"

"Huh?" Joanna queried, roused suddenly from her drifting thoughts.

"You did say it was pleasureable?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Perhaps without the interference of the third party it could be even more so."

"Are you saying you want to do that again?" Joanna asked incredulously, head snapping forward.

"At times one must repeat an experiment in order to verify data," Spock stated calmly.

"Oh, I'm an experiment, now,"

"You are a scientist. Surely you recognize the veracity of my statement."

"I recognize the veracity of a 'come on' when I hear one," she grinned.

"Come on?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean." She looked at him steadily. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Spock reached for her. She pulled back, startled.

"Not now. Not like this," she whispered.

"It is difficult ..." He looked down at his fists in his lap.

"I know," she agreed, half smiling. "Sometimes I think I'm the one who got the massive doses of the drug. I don't know what you did to me ... You got under my skin, Spock. No one got to me like you did."

"Perhaps there was a need ..."

"Need? There's always a need for something or other. It's a convenient excuse."

"An excuse for what?"

"Trying to deal with one's own demons. Trying to prove you're better than anyone else. Name it. There's a million reasons and I think I've used every one of them. You do that when you're running away from yourself."

"How can one run away from oneself?"

"This from the master?" She sighed, rubbing her hand across her forehead, "We all have things within that scare the living hell out of us. Things we all have to confront; failure, defeat, treachery, lies. You name it. Some have fears and anger so deep, so intense that the only way one can live with oneself is to lock them in a corner of one's mind. Then they haunt. They come in the night!"

"What torments you so?"

"Pinniok. Sometimes I can still smell the stench of death that wafted through that corridor as I headed out of Sickbay. In the night, I hear Lindsay's scream echoing in my ears. I see the charred bodies around me, grabbing at me, begging me to end their pain. I feel the metal tearing through my body ..." Tears leaked from under the closed eyelids. "I let Phredd and David down. I couldn't get to them to end their pain." Joanna bit her lip. "We made a pact. If it should ever come to pass that one of us was injured so badly that we couldn't be saved, the others would end it instead of letting the suffering go on. I didn't know until later; they were still alive when

Bonhomme Richard got there. They laid there, in agony all that time. I could have stopped it. A stranger had to do it. A stranger ..."

Spock reached out gathering her in his arms, holding her as she had held him earlier. The tangle of emotions surged through him. He understood her hurts, as she understood his.

Joanna stayed in that comforting embrace. It had been so long since there was someone who would, or could understand. She cried silently, grieving for those who never returned from Pinniok. She had cried for them many times before, on many other nights. And would do so again. Some wounds never heal.

After a time, Joanna sat up and gently released herself from Spock's arms. "I'm all right now," she said gruffly, resuming her position against the wall. "Thanks."

"Any time."

Joanna laughed. "I'm sorry. It just sounded funny coming from you."

"Did I use it inappropriately?"

"Not at all. It just sounded funny coming from you. It's such a ... human ... expression, like something my father would say rather than you."

"Your father would be pleased. He consistently badgers me to emulate him."

"Yes," she sighed. "I've experienced that myself."

Neither spoke for a while. Spock found himself starting to doze off.

"What about your demons?" Joanna asked him suddenly.

"I do not ..." He broke off and shifted uncomfortably under the look of mocking disbelief she threw at him. "Karn," he whispered after a moment's silence.

"Your demons come in the night, too. You're as haunted as I am, but for a different reason."

Spock hung his head. "You are aware of what I have endured. When they took me to the cell, they deprived me of my sight and hearing. My arms and legs were restrained. I was completely helpless. I never knew when they were coming. The drug tore my shields apart. I could not protect myself. Once, the blindfold slipped and I got a brief glimpse of one of my tormentors. It was Karn. I never knew when they had the drug with them. The only warning I would have was when the cup was pushed into my mouth. I would feel like I was suffocating. And all the time there was the pain. A searing, ripping pain tearing at me. I have no idea how long I was there. All concept of time was gone. I ... To be without any control ..." The rambling thoughts paused and he took a deep breath. "I have never known such terror."

"Loss of control over yourself is probably the most frightening thing anyone can experience," Joanna agreed.

"It is what I have always been afraid of," he admitted.

"Why?"

"It would make me less than I am."

"Or more."

"I don't understand."

"There are some ancient philosophers who maintain that to truly know oneself, one must experience utter degradation. Only then will one know the fiber of one's character."

"Do you believe that?"

"In some ways. What are we but a collection of experiences, response to stimuli that cause us to act and react in a certain fashion, depending on the situation. True, being from different cultures, your reactions would differ somewhat from mine, but they would, nonetheless, be reactions. We both would react according to our learned values, mores, ethics, etc. But take all that away. Take all the prejudice away and you have the true reaction of the individual."

"But what would govern the response if there was nothing upon which to base it?"

She shrugged slightly. "The evolutionists say we would respond out of instinct that has been in us since our respective prehistoric ancestors. I don't wholly subscribe to that theory. Nor do I subscribe to the theory that taking away everything we have learned will elicit pure response. There has to be some guidelines. But as for loss of control ... It teaches each of us that control is a nebulous thing. There is always something or someone that can wrest it from you. Once you come to understand that and how to minimize the effects of that loss, you then can influence the outcome of that loss."

Spock thought about her words. "You are saying that my terror of the situation stems from my being unable to minimize the loss of control."

"Kind of. You've never been in a situation like this one before. You also fully expected the rescue party to arrive, guns blazing, to pull you out of there. Well, Fate had other ideas for you just then. You based your actions on unfulfilled expectations. I'm not saying you should have willingly gone along with Turin's wishes, don't get me wrong. But you had set the formula for the situation allowing for no deviation. You forgot to figure in the unknown quantities."

"The unknown quantities?"

"The rescue party didn't arrive. The drug, Turin's impatience and Karn."

"It seems I underestimated the situation," Spock told her.

"In spades, Spock. In spades."

"Joanna ... Wake up. It is morning." Chekov gently shook her shoulder.

"Hmmm?"

"Wake up. Breakfast will be ready soon."

Joanna opened her eyes. They focussed slowly, sleep reluctantly giving way. "I'm awake, Pav. Thanks."

Chekov headed back for the fire, his mission accomplished.

"Spock ..." Gently she roused the Vulcan. During the long vigil, he had laid down, putting his head in her lap. "It's morning, Spock. We have to get up and eat."

He lifted his head, propping himself up on his arms and looked at her. His vision swam. He felt lightheaded.

"Are you all right?" Joanna asked anxiously.

"I am slightly lightheaded this morning," Spock admitted. "It is most disconcerting."

"Ok. Just get up slowly. I'll help you if you start to lose you balance." Spock followed her instructions. As he stood, a wave of nausea washed over him, then vanished.

"I am better. Thank you."

"Let's go get some food. That should help you some."

They walked over to the fire and joined the others. Joanna immediately sat next to her father and started conversing with him in low tones. Chekov handed Spock another bowl of stew, relieving him of the empty one. Spock found the flavor of the concoction pleasant, but different from what they had eaten previously. It tasted like ripe tomatoes from a garden; Amanda had had a garden on Vulcan where she grew tomatoes and other fresh vegetables she had brought from earth. Spock suddenly wished Amanda could take him in her arms as she had done when he was a very young child and soothe away the hurts. Sighing, he returned his attention to his food.

"Spock."

He looked up into McCoy's blue eyes. Joanna's eyes were very much like his. Hers, a slightly deeper blue, held the same concern. "Yes, Doctor?"

"Joanna told me you were a little dizzy this morning." Spock nodded his verification. "There is a very good chance you are going into withdrawal from the drug. I can't give you anything here. I don't have the right equipment to counteract this stuff. You have to let me or Joanna know. Maybe we'll get lucky and get out of here and back to the *Enterprise* before it hits."

"I understand, Doctor. I will inform you if I notice any changes." He sighed, then met the Doctor's gaze once more. "I want my mind back, Leonard, and I want to go home. To the *Enterprise*."

"I know," McCoy said quietly. "I know."

The group stepped out of the mound and into the cavern. Shouldering their respective packs, they continued on and within moments, their shelter was out of sight. They travelled on, no one wanting to voice their concern that their journey seemed to be never-ending. As they went, a cavern wall seemed to block their path; once they were close to it, they saw the path veer off sharply continuing through another opening.

They were a few yards from the opening when Spock suddenly stopped. The slight dizziness he'd been experiencing since waking had suddenly been replaced by a deep uneasiness as he surveyed the smooth stretch of ground leading to the passage opening.

"Spock, are you all right?" McCoy came back to the Vulcan. "Still dizzy?"

"I do not want to cross that," Spock said in a perplexed voice. Conscious of the Doctor's scrutiny, he added somewhat hesitantly, "I feel like there's something lurking out there."

"Lurking? Spock, maybe you'd better sit down for a few moments. We can wait ..."

"No. I do not see anything, but ..." He sighed and moved forward to where the others were waiting. They moved on, then halted when they reached a rock close by the opening. Joanna stared at something on the ground, then knelt down by the dark bundle. "Gods!" she blurted as she took the body by one shoulder, rolling it over on its back. It had been a man. Now bone broke through the tight pull of the skin.

"What did that?" she whispered, getting to her feet. Was there a horror loose in this place? A horror that she did not want to meet? Breathing a sigh, she started forward again. Somewhere a hunter roamed. A hunter whose method of killing was far removed from anything she had ever experienced.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, they entered the passage. Underfoot, the rock floor was

smooth. Hurrying forward, senses alert, they moved up the passage. No sound followed them, nothing moved before them. There was only rock; no vegetation, no place for anything to hide. As they progressed, the light grew dimmer, the odor of decay stronger. McCoy wrinkled his nose.

"I don't like the smell of this," he grumbled.

"It smells worse than a room full of Klingons," Chekov agreed. "I didn't think anything could smell worse than that."

Spock's stomach churned, the noxious air reminding him of his sojourn in the Teronian's cell. He thought of his promise to inform McCoy if he began to feel sick, but decided to wait. Perhaps it was just the air and not the beginning of something more serious. They continued on, Spock grimly trying not to retch.

"Get back!" Joanna yelled suddenly.

A huge, dark shape loomed in front of the group. The blackness of it filled the passageway. Slowly it moved forward.

"What is it?" Chekov asked.

"Dunno," Joanna said, as she stared at the creature.

The thing came on, its featureless head moving back and forth. It looked purple in color, with trails of a greenish-yellow ooze coming from its body. With a quick flick of her wrist, Joanna sent her knife through the air, impacting into the thing's "head." A piercing shriek filled the cavern, driving the group to their knees, hands clapped over their ears. They watched in horrified fascination as it split open and a multi-legged, spider-like thing came at them.

"I *hate* spiders," McCoy muttered, keeping behind Sulu, Chekov and Joanna.

The three deployed as far from each other as the passage allowed. Each had sword in hand. Chekov made a dash under the thing, slicing along its exposed underside. Sulu and Joanna stabbed at the multi-faceted eyes, each stroke connecting. It shrieked again, flailing with its front legs.

Joanna felt a leg slam into her back. It propelled her into the wall of the passage. She impacted with the front of her body, head turned to the right. Breath whooshed from her lungs and she collapsed.

Behind McCoy, Spock leaned against the wall, arm pressed tightly across his stomach, lips pressed tightly together. He hoped the Doctor would continue to ignore him and keep his attention on the combat. But McCoy turned, as if the thought summoned him, glaring at the Vulcan.

"Damn it Spock, I *knew* something was wrong! How long have you been having problems?"

"I am not 'having problems', Doctor. At least not much," he amended as McCoy opened his mouth. "My stomach has been upset since we entered this corridor. I believed at first it was the air."

"Cramps?"

"Some." Spock took a deep, shuddering breath. "I believe I am about to be sick. If you will excuse me, I ..." He broke off and started back down the passage.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" McCoy demanded, starting after him. He did not see his daughter go down.

"I would prefer to be sick in private."

McCoy stared at Spock in exasperation. "I'm sure the spider won't mind and the others are too damned busy right now to watch you throw up. And if you think I'm gonna let you go off alone, forget it!"

"Doctor, I hardly think that it is necessary for you to ..." he broke off, gasping, doubling over, overwhelmed by sudden cramping pain. Nausea swept over him and he dropped to his knees, retching over and over until there was nothing left in his stomach. Still the retching went on. Finally it stopped and the cramping eased. He sat for a moment catching his breath, then looked up to see McCoy watching him with worry in his eyes. Slowly, he regained his feet, leaning on the wall as McCoy handed him a water container.

"We should rejoin the others," Spock said, handing the container back. The cool water felt good in his throat. "There may be injuries."

They went back to where the others waited. The corridor was empty of the spider.

"What happened to it?"

"Illusion," Sulu answered simply. He had a slight cut and bump on his forehead.

"You should have remained here, Doctor."

McCoy whirled on the Vulcan. "You needed me, Spock. If you weren't so damned concerned that someone might see you less than perfect, I wouldn't have had to leave the others." He finished bandaging Sulu, then turned to Joanna. She and Sulu had collided when the thing abruptly disappeared. He examined her ribs, then grunted.

"Just bruised. You'll be sore, but you'll live." Joanna smiled at the echo of her own words.

McCoy turned to face Spock. "Just what are you going to do when this really hits, go off in a corner someplace by yourself? I may need help, Spock; there may be times that you'll be out of your head and I won't be able to handle you alone. And so help me, if I even *think* you're going to go off by yourself, I'll tie you hand and foot and that's the way you'll stay for the rest of this crazy trip. Even if I have to carry you myself! Is that clear?!"

"Don't tie me!" Spock replied quietly, a tremor in his voice. "I will do what you request, Doctor."

McCoy looked at the Vulcan sadly. "I didn't mean it like that, Spock." He sighed. "Just promise me you won't try to go off by yourself."

"I will not, Doctor. It is difficult to be so ... dependent," he finished.

"I know," McCoy agreed quietly, silently damning Turin for the millionth time.

"Can we get out of here?" Joanna asked wearily.

They moved on, the corridor widening as they did. The passage opened into another large cavern. Set into the roof were several ovals of a transparent substance which admitted streams of blood-red light. They shielded their eyes against the glare and tried to pick out a route across the seared landscape. It was impossible to discern any details in the shimmer of the heat waves.

"Well, now what?" McCoy said sourly. "We can't cross in that heat. We'd be baked in a half an hour."

"If night comes ..." Sulu started.

"We cross," Chekov finished.

"So, we wait," Joanna sighed, sinking tiredly to the floor of the passageway.

"We've got to move further back. The heat radiating in even this far will dehydrate us in minutes."

Chekov helped Joanna up and the party moved further back into the passage. They settled themselves to wait.

Spock dozed uneasily. He would wake at the slightest sound or movement from his companions. His body ached; cramping pain knotted and unknotted his stomach. Nausea threatened to hurl back the sips of water he took. He shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position.

"Look!" Sulu pointed. The light ahead was indeed dimming.

They waited a few more minutes, then slowly walked forward, senses alert. There was no sound. Nothing moved. The landscape in front of them was barren, only small rocks broke through the fine gravel floor here and there.

Spock felt fear growing inside. Fear of that landscape. There was no vegetation, only the flat, featureless floor. Small rocks jutted out here and there as if randomly thrown down. Slowly they moved out onto the floor of the cavern. They were the only living things on it. Not a whisper of noise came from around them. Their footsteps sounded alarmingly loud as the particles crunched underfoot. And yet Spock was certain something was out there, stalking them in the darkness. Light beams shone out over the floor, played on rocks as they went on. Nothing moved.

Walking became more difficult as the floor became a loose, gritty soil. No longer level, it undulated, rolling like the beginnings of dunes. Spock halted, putting his hand to his head. It was getting harder to think clearly. He turned, surveying the area. Rock. Just rock!

"What is it? Do you see something?" The sudden question startled him.

"Something ..." he said slowly. "Eyes ... watching."

"Where?" A light beam shone out as the questioner turned.

"There!" he pointed. The light swung to the spot he indicated.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Spock repeated soundlessly. He followed after the others, wavering on the gritty soil slipping under his feet so that once he fell and found it difficult to scramble up. He had to get to a hiding place and rest ... rest ...

"Spock! Come on Spock!" The voice broke into the bemused state he was in and part of his mind aroused enough to acknowledge.

"Something is out there," he said impatiently, his speech rushed and pressured. "Some living thing, projecting impressions of its presence where it isn't in order to confuse us. We must get away!"

The others looked from Spock to the Doctor in concern. Hallucinations? Or was he sensing something that the rest of them couldn't? McCoy shook his head and shrugged.

"Spock, there's nothing there! Come on!"

Spock's hand wiped across his face. He had to keep moving, he had to get out of this

place! He had to get the others out of here. They didn't believe him, but it was out there. He could see the shadows advancing among the rocks. Eyes ... one pair, then two, more ... Spock lost count as they danced about, weaving a pattern in the dark. He reeled back, tripped over a boulder, the shadows crawling, twisting, closing in on him. He cried out hoarsely and scrambled to his knees, crawling toward the eyes. If they would be content with him, the others could get away.

The attack was sudden, overwhelming, pinning him to the ground. Spock struggled feebly against the weight that held him down. He waited for the harsh, mocking laughter, the tearing pain; then the weight was gone and hands were helping him up, steadying him on his feet.

"Just a little futher," a familiar voice told him. He couldn't identify who was speaking. The faces in front of him wavered, lost form.

Then they were out of the open; walls enclosed them in a tunnel, narrowing until they had to go in single file. Dizziness fought with clarity as Spock's vision swam. Only by concentrating on each step, one foot in front of the other, could he continue. He fought the rising tide of blackness; icy sweat dripping from his face and body. As he opened his mouth to call for McCoy, cramps assailed him and he clamped his jaws against the desire to vomit. Vaguely he could hear someone calling his name, but he continued on, all his attention focussed on getting out of the confining space.

The passageway continued on for a short distance; then they were suddenly out in a large, open space lit by a light reminiscent of Earth's full moon. In the silver glow, they saw trees that looked as if they'd been transported from the forests of several different worlds. They headed toward them wearily.

"Doctor!" Spock gasped, trying to focus on the moving figures.

McCoy and Joanna turned simultaneously. Taking one look at the Vulcan, they moved towards him. Spock staggered, lost his balance and fell hard. Pain sliced through him, his entire body convulsing with it.

"Don't restrain him!" McCoy ordered as Chekov and Sulu moved forward. "Just don't let him hit anything while he thrashes around!" Finally Spock lay limp, his eyes closed.

"Damn!" McCoy swore quietly. "What next?"

Joanna looked at her father, shrugged her shoulders and said nothing. She had no answers for him.

"Spock?" Joanna dropped to her knees next to the Vulcan. There was no response. She checked his pulse, then looked at her father. "It's fairly steady. There is a slight fluctuation, but he's still alive."

"We'll go ahead and see if there's a place to set up camp," Sulu said, grabbing Chekov by the arm. "Come on, Pav! Let them do their doctor thing!" Within moments the two men were back. "The path leads to a glade just a short distance ahead. There's water and we can camp," Sulu reported. He looked at the motionless Vulcan. "Can we move him?"

"We don't have a choice," McCoy said. "You go with Chekov and set up! Sulu and I'll bring him in," he told Joanna.

Nodding, she stood, then shook her head. "Doesn't look like we're gonna get out of here before the worst of this hits."

"I think you're right," McCoy agreed grimly. "We'll just have to be ready for anything."

"Do you have anything with you?"

"A couple things, but not what we need."

"We're gonna have to wing this one, Doc," Joanna mumbled as she moved off with Chekov.

"How do you want to do this?" Sulu asked.

"Fireman's carry?" McCoy shrugged.

"McCoy?"

The low whisper caught him by surprise. McCoy knelt by Spock. "I'm right here, Spock. I thought you were unconscious."

"For a little while." He felt McCoy sit him up, holding him for support. "Please ... you should not touch me." Spock looked at McCoy. His eyes were dilated, feverish looking. "My ability to distinguish reality from hallucination has become erratic.

"I know, Spock," McCoy said gently. "We didn't make it. I'm sorry."

"In my present state I am a danger to all of you." He shook his head. "You do not understand! How can I explain it to you? Leonard, the drug consumes me! Please, you must not touch me! None of you must touch me! I cannot be responsible for what I may do in this state. I cannot distinguish friend from tormentor. I cannot stop this ..." He turned his head away, "...desire." The word came out in a whisper.

"Dear God!" McCoy breathed as the full intensity of what Spock was talking about hit him. It stunned him. His own body was trembling as waves of desire washed over him from the Vulcan. Gritting his teeth against the onslaught, McCoy tightened his hold. "I'm not letting this beat us Spock. I don't know what to do this moment, but, by God, I'll figure something out!"

"Doctor, let me go!" The fierceness in the voice surprised McCoy.

Slowly he let Spock go. Spock curled into a ball, panting and shivering.

"Spock?"

No response.

"Spock, we've got to get you to the camp!"

The shivering was starting to ease, but Spock stayed curled tightly in a ball.

"Spock, we can't let you stay here. Let me help you up."

"I will do it myself, Doctor," Spock replied through gritted teeth. With an effort, he rolled into a sitting position. Slowly, painfully, he stood unsteadily. McCoy moved to steady him, but Spock shoved the hand away. "I can walk."

Sulu and McCoy watched as Spock moved unsteadily, swaying as he stepped. Suddenly he began to fall then caught himself. "It seems I was mistaken," Spock said. "I shall require your assistance."

McCoy took Spock's arm, putting it over his shoulder, arm around the Vulcan's waist. Sulu took up the same position on Spock's other side.

Sulu gasped at the sudden surge of emotions that leapt from the Vulcan but he did not release his hold. Slowly they made their way to the camp.

McCoy examined the glade with relief. Trees closed in three sides. The fourth was the wall of the cavern itself. Water fell from a hole high in the wall, dropping into a clear pool below.

A stream wound its way from the pool into the forest, accompanied by the path they had been following.

They led the Vulcan over to the pile of bedding that had been readied for him. Shame and embarrassment mingled with the desire that flowed from Spock to the two who aided him. They settled him comfortably, then let him go.

"Sir, your shields are gone, aren't they?" Sulu asked quietly, kneeling next to Spock. During the trip into the camp site he had his first glimpse of what the others were talking about.

Spock nodded, his eyes averted. "I beg your forgiveness for imposing my lack of control, my ... feelings on you. It must have been most distasteful to you. I am grateful for your assistance."

"Mr. Spock, the only thing distasteful about all this is what you were put through. It was all so unnecessary!" Sulu sighed. "The important thing now is that we get you through this withdrawal as safely and quickly as possible." He held up his hand as Spock was about to protest. "We know you'd prefer that we weren't here, but we are. Sir, you've helped all of us many times in the past. Now it's our turn to help you."

Spock sighed. "I will attempt to cooperate," he promised.

McCoy sat down heavily by Joanna. Tiredly, he looked about him. Flowers grew here and there, their colors obscured by the growing darkness. Grass made a soft carpet beneath them and through the trees he could see the reflection of silver light on water. Chekov told him they were pools similar to the ones in the other cavern. McCoy took the steaming containers the Russian held out to him and handed one to Joanna. Sulu was feeding Spock some broth from the stew. McCoy looked at Spock and then at his daughter. He was amazed at what she had endured to help his friend. His daughter, he noted, was a very brave woman.

All color suddenly drained from the Vulcan's face. Muscles spasmed, then he was retching, vomiting uncontrollably. He convulsed, bowel and bladder emptying as his limbs flopped wildly about. His spine arched, his head snapped back rigidly.

"Shit!" Joanna was over to him instantly. Grabbing his head, she forced it to the side, clearing his mouth. "Grab his legs! I can't keep his airway open with him twisting around like a bloody eel!" The others snapped out of their frozen surprise, Sulu grabbing the legs first, then Chekov. McCoy was next to her, holding Spock's head over while she continued to clear his mouth.

"Breath, damn it!" she muttered furiously as she gripped his lower jaw, forcing it open, trying to keep him from swallowing his tongue.

Suddenly as it began, his muscles slackened and Spock sank slowly onto the soiled bedding, his breathing normal.

"Bozhe moi," Chekov breathed, sitting back.

"You can say that again, Pav," Sulu agreed wholeheartedly. "Are you two all right?" he asked, looking at the two shaken doctors.

"Christ," McCoy muttered. "That was close. Good work, darlin'."

"No. Just luck I was watching him at that moment. I saw his pupils go. That was too damn close," she agreed. "Someone's gonna have to stay up with him all night."

"Well, Missy, it's not going to be you!" McCoy told her sternly. "You're about dead on

you feet. You're gonna rest tonight if I have to hit you over the head."

Joanna smiled tiredly. "Rest is a nebulous term, Dad, but I'll try." She admitted to herself she really wasn't up to an all night vigil.

"We'll do it in shifts," Sulu said. "You guys tell Pav and me what to look out for and we'll wake you if it starts."

"Ok," McCoy agreed. "Let's get him cleaned up first."

With what seemed to be practiced ease they stripped the unconscious Vulcan. The four then carried him to a bathing area and slid him into the shallow part. Sulu and Chekov held him in place until McCoy and Joanna could get in. They took him from the two men who took the soiled bedding and clothes to another pool and washed them.

"I don't know what we're gonna do if this gets worse," McCoy muttered to Joanna as she washed Spock's face and hair.

"I'm startin' to get a little frightened. If it gets much worse we won't be able to handle it."

"Damn it, Chris, we had them! Where are they?" Sobutai asked her for the what must have been the hundreth time. It had been over 24 hours since the transmitter went dead.

"Well, we know they haven't been picked up. So they're still somewhere in the ruins."

"But where?"

"Pritr said those ruin are honeycombed with old tunnels. Maybe they got into one."

"But does it have a way out? If they're trapped in there, they're dead."

"According to him they all come out somewhere in the mountains."

"That's reassuring," Sobutai muttered, not at all reassured. "You sure put on a good act for ol' Turin. That was a real convincing mad."

"Yours wasn't too bad yourself. But I somehow don't think Joanna will like being called a whore bitch."

Sobutai looked at Chekov's men. They had returned with a negative report. "You three wait in my yacht. We will leave as soon as I make arrangements to have the freighter taken care of. Chris, can you contact Tenu? He has a ship in the area. He'll be able to loan us a couple of men." Chapel nodded. "I'll check through the dens one more time. I have contacts there. If they're anywhere in Shnarr, these people will know it."

Nightmares! Images of Karn and the soldiers bending over him, reaching for him. Then pain. Everyting turning to pain. He cried out, choked it off. Someone was shaking him, telling him to wake up. He opened his eyes and stared at Chekov in some confusion. Then his face twisted and when he spoke, his voice was bitter.

"So you have changed your mind and decided that you must have me too!" He pushed the cover from him, exposing his naked body, then waited to see what the Russian would do. Chekov made no move, astonished by Spock's words and actions.

"Why do you wait?" Spock whispered hoarsely. "Is this not why you have come? I

cannot stop you. Go on and have done with it!" For a moment he stared at Chekov, the hurt and resignation showing clearly before he lowered his eyes. "You may do as you wish. I will cooperate. I have no wish to be sent back to Karn."

"No, Mr. Spock," Chekov said firmly. "I am not here to ...to...."

"Then help me, please!"

The plea tore Chekov's heart. Spock's eyes were wide with desperation. Timidly, he sat up, reaching out to Chekov. "I will do anything you ask, please you any way you require if you will take me away from here. Do not send me back to Karn!"

Chekov felt Spock's touch on his hand. Overwhelming desire rushed through that connection. Quickly, he broke the contact reminding himself that the drug had done, was doing, this. Shaking his head, Chekov steeled himself as he placed his hands on Spock's shoulders. Gently he pushed the Vulcan back into the bedding and pulled the covering over him.

Spock caught his breath as if to smother a cry of pain and buried his face in his hands, his body shaking with tremors that quickly became out of control. Fear turned his thoughts to confusion. Chekov didn't want him. Or so he said. Did he mean to return him to Turin after all? Soon Karn would return and the tortures would begin all over again. A sob forced its way out, then another, and a tear slowly spilled from beneath tightly closed lids. "Why do you toy with me this way?" he cried.

Chekov knelt beside the Vulcan, gently touching his shoulder. Spock's body quaked beneath his touch and he heard him groan under his breath. Again came the feelings of arousal, mixed with terror, frustration and anger.

"Please," Spock begged frantically, grabbing Chekov, "Don't let them take me. Don't let Turin drug me any more."

"No more drugs," Chekov told him. "Damn," he swore softly, instinctively pulling Spock to him. "It's all right, Mr. Spock, it's all right. You're safe." He felt Spock starting to relax, then suddenly he stiffened, looking over Chekov's shoulder in wide-eyed panic.

"No! You lied!" Spock hurled himself away from Chekov, scattering the bedding in his haste to get away. "They've come for me! You lied!!" He got to his feet. Trying to run, he tripped over the bedding and fell. Chekov caught him, breaking the fall and tried to calm him. Spock fought madly, still screaming.

Joanna was instantly awake at the first scream. McCoy and Sulu a split second behind. All three converged on the struggling men. McCoy and Sulu grabbed his arms. Joanna grabbed his head in both her hands. "Spock! Spock listen to me. You're safe. You're here with me. Karn is not here. No one is going to hurt you." Her voice was soft, soothing, almost beguiling. Gradually Spock stopped struggling. At her nod, the other three men released their holds. Instantly, Spock wrapped his arms around her, sobbing.

"What happened?" McCoy asked Chekov, examining a rapidly swelling bruise on his cheek.

"Nightmare. I didn't have enough time to wake anyone." Chekov winced as McCoy probed the injury. "That hurts."

"I don't doubt it. I don't feel any broken bones. Get some of that cool water on a piece of that bark stuff and hold it on there for a mite bit. It won't stop the hurt, but maybe it'll help the swellin'." He looked questioningly at Joanna.

"I can handle it," she said, looking at the three. "Y'all might as well get some rest. I may be awake for a while. He's hysterical. The less people he sees around him right now, the better off he'll be."

McCoy nodded. He didn't want to leave her alone with Spock while he was like this, but she was right. Too many people around just might set him off again. It was bad enough with the hallucinations. Who knows what physical presence could do. "Yell if you need help."

"Don't worry. I'll yell real loud," she smiled. She watched the other three move their bedding a little further away, then settle down. Spock was still sobbing, cradled in her arms. "It's ok. I'm here. No one is going to hurt you while I'm here."

Eventually the crying stopped. Spock sat within the encircling comfort, relaxed, exhausted. With a deep breath, he looked up at her. "You came for me."

"I never left. I was asleep."

"You will not let them have me." It was a statement, not a question.

"No. I won't."

Spock sat up, his face even with hers. He looked into her eyes, blue pools with such depth of passion ... He felt urgency begin to rise within him.

Joanna felt it too. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she put a tight lid on her own emotional response. "No, Spock. Not now. You're ill. You're having hallucinations due to a drug withdrawal."

"I must ..."

"No. There is no one here to command you. You are free. You do not have to perform for anyone now."

"It is like ..." he paused, wincing with the intensity of the urges, "a hot fire running through me. It burns me. I cannot stop it." Agony laced his voice. "It is out of control. Joanna, help me!"

"Why do you do this to me," she whispered, closing her eyes, head back. "Damn you, why? Why you?" She looked at him. "I ... can't," she told him.

"Then I will find someone who can!" He broke her hold and struggled to his feet. Joanna watched him weave his way toward the others. Wearily, she got up and overtook him. "Spock, listen to me!"

"I am burning up inside. Can't you understand? This thing, this beast they have made me become is out of control!"

Joanna looked at him. He sounded surprisingly coherent. "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes," he grated raggedly. "I am in some cavern with you, Sulu, Chekov and your father. And I am out of control. I need your help."

Joanna bit her lip, looked at the three men, then made her decision. "Come on." She led him behind the screen of trees that separated the bathing pool. "Get in the water and sit there. Try to relax. I'm going to try the pressure points on your neck and shoulders."

Spock felt her touch. The first point was sore, painful as she pressed on it. Soon, he felt himself relaxing a little. The intensity abated slightly. Under her ministrations, Spock felt the rest of the tension slowly ebb away. "Thank you. I am grateful. If I would have ..." He hung his head. "I would have hurt you."

"I know," she said, sitting back on her heels. "But, Gods, Spock, it was tempting. And, damn it, it still is." She shook her head. "If this situation would have been different, I would have."

He climbed from the pool, then sat next to her. With a toss, she threw the covering from his bedding at him that she had scooped up. "It is confusing," Spock sighed.

"What is?"

"I feel ashamed of my actions, my desires. The lack of control is deplorable. But, strangely, at the same time I feel a liberation. A part of me does not want to regain that control."

"I know. I sort of went through the same thing myself after that first night. The night of the feast. And then the second time, with you and Turin. It feels so good to just do the things that you think of in your wildest moments of imagining. Then you crash back down to reality and you're amazed and aghast that you did them. Yet there's this little voice in the back of your head telling you how great it was and you'd like to do it again." Spock nodded his agreement.

They sat for a while, listening to the splash of the waterfall behind them. She saw Spock's head drop forward, then he jerked himself upright. "Come on, let's get you back into your bedding. You need some sleep." Obediently, Spock followed her. Seconds later, he was sound asleep. Joanna sat nearby, leaning against a tree trunk. When she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer, she woke her father, then settled into her own bedding.

She awoke to the sound of voices. Sitting up, she looked in the direction of the sound. Her father, Sulu and Chekov were with Spock who was rambling incoherently. His head tossed from side to side as he tried to break the grip of the three men. With a sigh, she rose and went over to them. As she got closer, she could see the strain on their faces as they braced themselves against the emotional onslaught emanating from the Vulcan.

Nudging Sulu, she helped hold his legs. Joanna gasped as she felt the intense surge slam into her. "How long?" she asked from between gritted teeth.

"On and off since a little before daybreak, or at least what this place thinks is daybreak," McCoy responded. After what seemed long moments, Spock once again lay motionless, his breathing labored.

"DT's?" Joanna inquired. McCoy nodded his response as he, too caught his breath.

"Some worse than others. At least he was asleep for this one. Sulu and Chekov had to chase him down a little while ago."

"Why didn't you wake me?" she asked accusingly.

"Because you needed rest as much as he does. Damn it, I'm the physician in charge here and if I decide you need rest, then you rest! Besides," McCoy's tone softened, "there was really nothing you could do." He met his daughter's gaze. "Do you feel any better?"

"A little," she admitted. Joanna rubbed the back of her neck. "Must've been lying crooked." Sighing, she accepted the warm drink Sulu gave to her. It smelled like coffee and tasted like a cross between that and chocolate. Savoring it as it went down, she suddenly realized how hungry she was. "Any idea what time it is?"

"No idea, but you slept a long time," McCoy told her. "Turn around, let me see that neck."

She felt her father's gentle touch as he massaged the sore muscles. Sighing, she found herself wishing the two of them were on one of their many rides in the country in Georgia. He would get home whenever he could and take her on long rides through the Georgia pines. Many times they would picnic by a river or stream. They would talk of his adventures or her dreams for the future. But all too soon it would end and he would have to go back to duty and she would have to stay with her mother. Before he had been assigned aboard a ship, she would occasionally get to spend vacations with him. But her mother put a stop to those with his first ship.

She and her mother had never been as close as she and McCoy. And years later open hostilities would break out between mother and daughter. Her mother had sent her condolences at the loss of her friends. Condolences! As if the proper social mouthings would make everything all right. Joanna hadn't spoken to her mother since. She couldn't even clear her busy schedule to make the trip to be with her daughter as she lay in the critical care unit hovering between life and death. But her father had. Not only did he come, and the *Enterprise* with him, but he had stayed until she was well on the road to recuperation. Only then would he go back to his home.

"That better?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks." She rolled her head feeling the freedom in the muscles. "Have you ever wished things had been different in your life?" Joanna suddenly asked.

"Like what?" McCoy countered.

"You and mother staying together. Our family being a real family. Stuff like that."

McCoy looked at her thoughtfully. There was an odd tone to her voice. "Sometimes. Especially on long voyages. I would wonder what it would be like to come home to my wife and daughter. I sure did miss you, darlin'. More than I can tell you."

"I missed you a lot too, Dad."

"Guess your mother and I made a mess of things."

"Sometimes," Joanna smiled. "But you two wouldn't have been happy if you'd stayed together. Your careers just didn't mesh. And you don't like social functions."

"Never did, never will," he agreed. "How about you. Do you wish you'd have done anything different?"

She thought for a moment. "Not really. But I still have time," she laughed.

"Hey, Doc, he's starting again!"

They rushed over to Sulu to see Spock trembling violently. Suddenly the Vulcan sat upright, eyes wide, but unseeing. "He's really out this time," Sulu muttered.

"Spock," McCoy called. There was no response, no sign of recognition. "SPOCK!"

"Spock, lay down, it's all right." Joanna touched his arm. Suddenly the Vulcan swung, connecting with her chin. Stars danced in her vision as she fought the blackness that threatened to overwhelm her.

"You all right," McCoy asked, concern visible in his eyes.

"Give me a minute. I haven't taken a shot like that since that bar brawl on Rigel." Shaking her head to clear it, she stood behind Spock. "Dad, I'm gonna need your help. There's a spot at the base of the skull that will induce sleep when depressed. It usually requires both hands, but I want to have one free to fend off blows. And I'm not sure it's gonna work in the state he's in."

"Show me," McCoy nodded, moving next to her.

Joanna pressed one hand to the spot, holding up the other to shield her from any errant blows. "Right next to mine." McCoy did likewise. Chekov and Sulu stayed in front of the Vulcan, ready for anything. After awhile, Joanna could feel her hand starting to cramp from the pressure she was exerting. Suddenly, Spock went limp, falling forward. Sulu and Chekov caught him, then laid him back on the bedding.

Joanna stood, rubbing her hand. "Wasn't sure it was going to work."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"Vulcan Science Academy. Don't know how long it will last. But at least we don't have to deal with any more convulsions for the moment. But in his condition, I don't dare try it again."

They settled Spock warmly. He slept briefly, woke, slept again. He was restless, occasionally crying out, sometimes starting up, wild-eyed, but never quite surfacing. McCoy and Joanna watched and worried over him. The obvious nightmares snapped him awake into upright, shaking agony, eyes glazed, turned inward, still seeing whatever haunted him. He was unaware of his surroundings and the people who cared for him. And the convulsions, wild uncontrolled movement that turned the Vulcan inside out, forcing him to cry out with the pain.

It became a fuzzy dream for Spock, with alternating periods of waking pain, voices and hazy faces. Then haunted sleep again. Deep blue eyes and a soothing, melodic voice, floated in and out of his consciousness; a face he knew but could not put a name to, cooling his fever and soothing his pain. Time and again Spock tried to reach out, but he could never quite grasp hold before slipping back to the blackness and the nightmare of his dreams. Over and over he heard the laughter, felt the pain and shame. And always Turin standing triumphantly over him, drugging him, destroying his soul!

The day wore on. Sulu and Chekov watching with McCoy or Joanna, caring for Spock as the withdrawal progressed. They grew silent with worry, tending the camp and themselves automatically, their minds focussed on the Vulcan. They watched, waited and hoped. Once more the light dimmed and night came to the cavern. And with it a stillness unbroken by any cries. For the last two hours he had laid still, breathing ragged and erratic, but free of the convulsions and the restlessness that had marked the past hours. Suddenly, McCoy caught his breath. Dark eyes met his.

A paralyzing cramp constricted the Doctor's chest. He didn't so much as blink. The dark eyes were slowly focussing.

McCoy saw the dry lips move. A barely audible noise came from them. He swallowed and leaned closer. "Spock?"

The dark eyes flickered, finding McCoy's face again. The blankness melted out of them, then, a deep awareness kindling in its stead.

"You ...?" Spock breathed, then coughed softly, clearing his throat. "I thought ... Turin...Karn..."

A painfully broad grin overran McCoy's face and wouldn't leave. Giddiness rushed him. He took a deep, shuddering breath. He didn't trust his voice. He barely whispered. "Sorry to disappoint you."

Spock blinked, then suddenly lowered his eyes in confusion. A slow flush suffused his face. "It is ... over?" he asked quietly.

"I think so. I don't have a scanner to verify this, but I think the worst is well over."

"Then surely ... I am not ... disappointed, Doctor." Spock closed his eyes, seeming to savor the sensations of inhaling. He felt as though he needed both food and a bath but he was already sinking back into sleep. He reopened his eyes slowly, drowsily and looked at McCoy. His hand fumbled weakly, reaching, touching McCoy's arm. He almost smiled. "Thank you."

Spock's eyes closed. McCoy let the hand down gently, tucking it under the coverings. "You're welcome, Spock," he answered quietly, blinking back tears.

Chekov glanced over at McCoy from his seat by the fire. "Is he ..."

"He'll be all right," McCoy told him, weariness and joy in his voice.

Chekov grinned and sighed with relief before turning back to feed the fire. He quietly passed the word to Sulu, who relieved him before the night was out. Joanna found out when her father awakened her well after the light had grown again.

Spock woke slowly and stretched muscles tired and aching from the recent strain. Chekov greeted him with a smile and a cup of warm liquid. This time, Spock did smile back. A shy and hesitant smile, but a smile nonetheless. Looking around, he saw the others by the fire, watching him with relief and, he started with the realization, a joy that he was alive and relatively well. For a moment his smile was directed at them, too, then it faded into his usual blank-faced composure. He glanced over to where McCoy slept close by, worn out by his constant vigilance. Then Sulu was bringing him a bowl of something hot, something that smelled and tasted delicious. He finished it hungrily and wondered if he could have more. He decided it was better not to force the issue and sighed. He was still quite hungry, but it had been so long since he'd eaten properly that he didn't care to face the prospect of a rebellious stomach.

Joanna came over to him and took the empty bowl and mug. Meeting her eyes, he remembered an earlier incident between them. Heat rose in his cheeks. She smiled her understanding and the blush deepened.

"Think you have enough strength to clean up?" she asked him.

"I could try," he told her honestly. "I still feel rather weak."

"I'll ask the guys to walk you to the bathing pool and sit with you. Just take your time. We can afford to wait a little longer."

"I did not mean to be such a ... burden."

"You weren't." Again she smiled. "We're all just happy to see you alive and improving. You had us pretty worried for a while."

"That was not my intent, I assure you."

"I know. But, damn it, Spock, you did it. You beat the odds."

Spock looked up at the sound of the pure joy in her voice. He became lost in the deep blue of her eyes, then he remembered. "You were with me. All of you. But I ... felt you with me more than the others. I did not do this alone, Joanna." He paused briefly. "Your willpower would not let me leave even though I wanted to." He regarded her steadily for a long moment. "I am grateful for all you have done ... and sacrificed for me."

This time it was her turn to blush. She had never thought of herself as self-sacrificing. Nor had she realized she was willing him back from the edge of oblivion. The truth of his words

embarrassed her. "Hell, nothing I wouldn't do for any of my patients," she answered flippantly, trying to deny her growing feelings for this man.

"I ... see," Spock answered, suddenly feeling a pit open in his stomach.

"Pav, Hikaru, can y'all lend Spock a hand to the pool?"

"Sure, Doc, no problem," Sulu answered.

"Don't call me 'Doc'," Joanna grumbled.

Sulu just grinned. "Your wish ..." he told her, bowing with a flourish. Joanna just closed her eyes and shook her head.

Spock wasn't in the pool long before McCoy joined him. "We beat it Spock! You're gonna be all right!" McCoy glowed. Spock seemed to be back to his normal self ... almost. There was still the matter of the remainder of the drug running around in his system. Neither he nor Joanna had any idea how long it would actually take for the remnants to leave, if ever. And then there was the problem of the dependency. What if they couldn't find the antidote? What if he never regained his shields? What if ... There were too many "what ifs." McCoy shoved them to the back of his mind lest they show on his face. It was still too early to tell how Spock was going to deal with the emotional trauma he had been through. McCoy was determined he was not going to let Spock withdraw into himself. This time he refused to be shut out by that Vulcan facade. Spock was damn well going to let him in and that was that! "And to think we did it with good, old fashioned doctorin'."

"Beads and rattles," Spock said provocatively.

"What?!" McCoy sputtered, rising to the bait.

"You did it all with beads and rattles. A rather outdated mode of medicine," the Vulcan continued coolly. He concealed his own delight at once again being able to provoke McCoy behind his impassive mask. "Primitive."

"And just to spite you, it worked!" McCoy retorted. He suddenly realized Spock had lapsed into their time honored bantering. "No machines, no miracle cures, just good old-fashioned ..."

"Vulcan healing techniques," Spock finished.

"You ungrateful menace to mental stability. I should've left you there to bedevil the Teronians. It would've served all y'all right!" McCoy sputtered.

"Your sense of responsibility ..." Spock retorted quickly.

"Shows up at the damndest times," McCoy flashed back.

Spock sat himself on the edge of the pool, pausing to catch his breath. Even the little effort it had taken him to bathe had tired him. He felt McCoy drop something across his shoulders. After another moment, Spock stood and dried himself. By the time he had dressed, he felt drained.

McCoy eyed Spock critically, clinically assessing the weight loss, the shadows under his eyes. The worst injuries were inside, in the mind and psyche where his medications wouldn't reach. And he wasn't really sure about what kind of psychology to use on a Vulcan.

"Leonard."

McCoy looked a question at his friend.

"I am most grateful for everything you have done to assist my recovery." He held up his

hand to forestall the Doctor's comments. "I had... great need of your friendship as well as your skills. You were there. I could feel you with me. I could feel Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov, too. I do not know how to repay ..."

"You don't need to. That's what friends do for each other. On some subconscious level or another we've all done it millions of times before. You're alive. And as soon as we get home we'll set everything to rights. You can count on that!"

"Thank you." A sigh escaped him. He knew McCoy and he knew Jim Kirk. Neither man would be content to let him retreat into the safety of his own private hell. If they had to, they would hound him night and day until they were both sure he could cope with his memories and ... feelings.

"Do you think you could manage to move on a little?" McCoy asked him. "I would like to get back to *Enterprise* as soon as possible."

"I shall make the attempt."

"You let us know when you get tired, hear?" Spock merely nodded.

The others were waiting for them, supplies packed, area cleaned as if it had never contained a camp site. Sulu and Chekov greeted Spock as if the past few days had never happened, acting as if they were on a routine planetary survey. Except for the distant look in Joanna's eye, he might have been able to believe that little bit of fiction.

Slowly, he shouldered his pack and fell into line. Sulu led the way out of the cavern, following the stream and the path next to it. Where it diverged, they stopped to refill their water bottles, then went on until they came to a blank wall.

Each inspected it carefully for signs of a doorway. There was no crack in the solid wall. No mark, no hint of indentation or trigger mechanism.

"So what do we do now? Go back?" McCoy grouched.

"We could wait and see if it's like the first door," Sulu suggested.

No one answered. They had come this far to be stopped by a dead end. They must've missed another path.

Joanna turned her look on Spock. He stood, head down, as if examining something in the floor. She moved closer to inspect what held his attention and saw a black corkscrew shaped spiral in the rock. She, too, studied it for a moment. Recognition flared in the back of her mind, but she couldn't place it. Without knowing why, she crossed to where the spiral began and followed it, walking, one foot in front of the other; it was a delicate balancing act. She felt like an acrobat. She was dimly aware of Spock asking questions, of the others looking at her as if she'd lost her mind. Maybe she had. Suddenly, she was in the center of the spiral, looking back the way they had come. A light was rising about her, a shimmering haze separating her from the rest.

Fighting disorientation, she became aware of her surroundings. It was a completely different cavern from the one they had been in. A vast expanse broken only by lines of huge blocks supporting a ceiling above, rose out of an evil looking marsh.

"Dad!" she called. "Spock ... Sulu ... Chekov!" She tried to fight down the rising panic that engulfed her. She was alone. Fears, frustration and fatigue boiled over into rage. She was shaking. The anger ate at her until she wanted to scream, to strike out at something, anything that got in her way.

Two hands suddenly grabbed her shoulders. Instinctively she tried to twist away to give herself fighting room, but her exhausted body wouldn't obey her. Then a voice, Spock's voice, was speaking. Slowly, she yielded to the gentle pressure and sat down. The others appeared one by one as her body swayed against Spock's. She felt his arms close around her, offering support, comfort. Abruptly, she straightened, pulling away. Standing, she looked at him. "Thank you," she said coolly. "I thought I was alone in this ... place." Seconds later the others joined them and they moved through an opening in the rock face.

At last they came out in the open, the crisp air whirling about them. Spock shivered in the cold, as did the others. A stretch of mud-spotted marsh lay between their present perch and a rocky hillside. A rough, broken causeway ran to a ridge. The cold wind whipped around them as they stood on the small square of stone, surveying the area. Crossing it, cold-stiffened limbs moving slowly, they made their way to the top of the ridge. There, they faced two rock pillars which led into a small cave. They stumbled into it. Spock sat, huddling into a ball, shivering uncontrollably now.

McCoy started rummaging in his pack for something to cover the Vulcan with. The movement was never completed. A sparkling light suddenly surrounded them. When their forms coalesced once more, they found themselves on a small transporter pad.

"What the devil ..." McCoy sputtered.

"Sorry to bring you up so suddenly, Doctors, all, but Sobutai gave us strict orders that as soon as we picked up the beacon we were not to hesitate for a second," a man told them.

Sulu looked around and whistled. "Hey Doc, this is our freighter!"

"Sobutai got Turin to release it to him."

"Who are you?" Joanna asked, curious. The man resembled Sobutai.

"Jaryn Tanara. I'm a second cousin to Sobutai. Head of his ... ah, procurement section."

Joanna laughed. "I should've known."

"Settle back everyone. We'll have you to *Enterprise* in no time."

The freighter came to a stop in the shuttle bay. Once all was secured, the party stumbled wearily out. Jim Kirk strode through the open doorway of the hangar deck. "Spock, Bones," he called trying not to run toward his friends. He grabbed Spock's shoulders and winced as he got hit with the emotional overflow. He refused to flinch back from his friend. Instead, he countered with relief, love and happiness that Spock was back. "We need to get him to Sickbay," Kirk stated before McCoy could interrupt.

Joanna sighed and slumped against the hull of the freighter. Moments later the owner of the ship entered the hangar deck and boarded it with his crew.

Joanna looked up as her father came into her quarters. McCoy, Kirk and Spock has spent a long time huddled in Spock's quarters. She put down her drink, "Ok, I give. What's all the secrecy about."

"It seems that someone sent this ... tape to Jim. He said he was angry at first, then he

realized exactly what was happening and deduced why. He wants to kill Turin along with the rest of us." McCoy shook his head. "I think, my dear, you impressed Jim. He was almost awestruck."

"This is serious, Dad. I'm not amused. If Jim has that tape, Lord knows who else does. This could ruin reputations."

McCoy sobered, "No. Jim made sure he had the only copy. Sobutai's family took care of that."

"Sobutai's here?"

"Not yet. He and Chris have gotten hold of the antidote. They'll be here in a couple of days. Spock is stable enough to wait that long." Joanna nodded her agreement. "Who do you suppose sold that tape?"

"Probably a servant wanting extra money. There's a couple of booths in the Artist's Quarter that specializes in that stuff. Turin's exploits are famous planet wide. They're probably the hottest selling tapes in Shnarr. Besides, you know as well as I do anything's fair game on the black market."

"I'd like to see Turin's face when he finds out." McCoy started to chuckle..

Spock walked into Sickbay as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. At least that was how it looked to the staff on duty. He paused at the entrance to McCoy's office.

"Well, either go in or go away," McCoy drawled from behind him.

Spock entered without looking back.

"Are you all right?"

Spock shrugged. "I am ... functional. Doctor, I do not understand. I never expected the Captain to be angry. He stated in our debriefing that he was 'mad enough to kill something.'"

"Guilt, Spock. Guilt makes people react in different ways. He felt it was his fault that you had been captured, that he's the one who put your life in danger. Then he got hurt and he couldn't go back for you. That compounded it."

Spock nodded. "I see. I do not understand how a recording of that particular incident was sent to him. Someone had to know who I was." He looked at the Doctor hesitantly. "Doctor, about your daughter ..."

"She told me everything. It wasn't your fault."

"I lost control of the situation."

"Seems to me you never had control. Don't you remember?"

Spock hung his head. "All too vividly, Doctor. My memory was the only thing not affected by the drug." He looked up at the Doctor. "I ... I do not know how to deal with this. Please help me."

Oh, Lord, McCoy thought. He finally comes to me for help and it's something like this. What can I tell him? He looked at the Vulcan for a moment. "Don't shut yourself off from us," he told him.

"I will endeavor not to."

"I know, Spock. But, damn it, you're our friend! We are concerned about your continued well-being." McCoy paused, he couldn't say what he wanted to without causing Spock further

embarrassment. Instead, he retreated behind the doctor facade. "What I want to do is take a blood sample to see if we can analyze the components of the drug that's left in your system. But in the meantime, you need to talk to Jim some more and let him know it's not his fault. And probably Joanna, too. She may not look it, but she's upset by this mess, too."

"Doctor, I don't think ... she may not want to ... Those last few hours in the maze it seemed as if she was avoiding me."

"She was exhausted, Spock. That mess with the spider-thing brought back some bad memories. Between that and you, I don't think she was handling things too well at the end."

"I see. Very well, Doctor, I shall speak with her." He hesitated a moment, then sighed.

"Tell him yourself, Spock. I had a little chat with him. He's tearing himself up."

Spock sighed.

"Why don't you go get some rest," McCoy suggested gently. "You can talk to Jim later."

Spock nodded and started for the door. He halted as McCoy continued.

"Are you gonna be all right by yourself?"

"I believe so. If not, I will call," he added forstalling McCoy's next remark.

McCoy watched Spock leave, then hit the com button. "Chris!" he called. "Damn!" he thought, "she's still on that damned planet. I hope that cousin of hers knows what he's doin'."

Kirk sat at his desk trying to read the refit reports that Scotty had sent up. So far everything was going as planned and he felt absolutely useless. Suddenly, from the next room came a scream, choked off in mid-cry. For an instant Kirk stood perfectly still, confused, roused so suddenly from his thoughts by such piercing terror. Then he was moving rapidly into the alcove that adjoined his and Spock's quarters and on into Spock's sleeping area as another cry rent the air. The scream echoed through the room, filling the darkness with sound. Kirk reached the bed where the Vulcan lay, flat on his back, screaming those terrible screams. Kirk stared for a moment in disbelief. Spock? ... screaming? Impossible!

"Spock? Spock!" He shook the Vulcan lightly.

Cold, darkness, pain! Mocking laughter washing over him, drowning out his cries as Karn drugged, then tortured him. Tearing, searing pain, a white hot agony slicing through mind and body, devouring his soul ...

"Come on Spock," Kirk said coaxingly. "Wake up. Come out of it!"

There was a movement in the shadows and a tall man in an embroidered robe appeared, waving Karn off of him. Spock shuddered and tried to move away as Turin unfastened the manacles, catching him by the shoulders as he slumped forward, not letting him escape. A low moan escaped Spock's lips. He was so tired and could not fight the drugs and the pain any more. A sense of hopelessness and utter fatigue filled Spock as Turin gently drew him into his arms, pulling him close.

"Spock, wake up!" Kirk said more firmly, gripping him by the shoulders.

Spock struggled up out of the depths of sleep, shaken out of the nightmare by hot, almost scorching hands on his shoulders and a commanding voice in his ear.

At last Spock's eyes met Kirk's and choking, gasping he said something that Kirk could not understand.

"What Spock?" he questioned, his hold on the Vulcan tightening.

"Turin, Karn ..." Spock said clearly, at last wide awake. "I thought they ... I ..." His voice trailed off as he looked around him. Cold. He was so cold.

"It was only a dream, Spock. You're on the *Enterprise*. You're safe!" Kirk watched him with concern. The Vulcan was shivering so hard he could barely speak.

"Yes ... of course," he gasped out between gritted teeth. "Captain ... I ... regret disturbing you. I shall endeavor to not let it ..." He shivered again, uncontrollably.

"God, Spock, you're freezing!" Kirk snagged the quilt at the foot of the bed and wrapped it about the Vulcan's shoulders. It wasn't enough. Spock shook with tremors he could not stop and the quilt wasn't doing anything to warm him.

"Spock ..." Kirk began, then simply wrapped his arms around the Vulcan and held him.

Spock stiffened and tried to pull away.

"I'm just trying to get you warm again," Kirk said reassuring his friend. "I'm here, Spock. It's ok. You're safe. You're home."

Spock's shoulders slumped wearily. Kirk held him; just held him, that was all, as if he were made of delicate spun glass and would shatter at a breath. Spock could feel the human's compassion and warmth flowing into him and it felt reassuring.

Kirk could feel the tremors that still shook the Vulcan's body and he frowned. To him, the room was hot, almost unbearably so, kept at the higher ambient temperature that Vulcans prefer. But Spock was still shivering with cold and fear.

"Spock, I ... what happened down on the planet ..." He broke off as Spock looked at him, startled, then apprehensive. For a moment Kirk caught a glimpse of the deep shame in the dark eyes. Spock's reply astonished him, caught him off guard.

"I understand, Captain. Do you require my resignation or will a request for transfer be sufficient?" There was open anguish on his face now and a single tear slid down one cheek, shining silver in the dim light. Spock either didn't notice or didn't care. When he spoke again his voice had lost any hint of control; it was tight and rough with tension and unhappiness. A second tear joined the first, slipping silently from the corner of Spock's eye.

"I suppose ... I know I must revolt you. What happened with Turin, Joanna ... I do not blame you I ..."

A flash of agony convulsed the Vulcan's face; pain so vivid that Kirk instinctively pulled the Vulcan's shaking form carefully to him, holding Spock closely and firmly when he tried to pull away. And suddenly Kirk was feeling what Spock was feeling. Absolute revulsion at himself, despair, contempt. Under the self-loathing, a desperate fear that Kirk and McCoy would repudiate him, hate him for what he'd done and cast him out of their lives and hearts.

Kirk's heart ached for his friend. "No," he whispered. "No, Spock. You are home. I don't want you to leave. You are my friend."

A sob forced its way out, then another. Spock couldn't stop the tears anymore than he could stop the shivering. "Please," he whispered hoarsely, trying once more to pull away. "If I had completed Kholinar ..."

"You would not have been able to survive," Kirk finished. "You could not have even remotely understood the situation." Kirk interrupted soothingly as he settled the Vulcan into a comfortable position on his shoulder, supporting him like a little child. "It's all right. Cry yourself out. It's just you and me and I'll never tell a soul. On my honor!"

Spock clung to him then, trembling uncontrollably as harsh sobs tore at his body. He sagged against Kirk's shoulder, burying his face in the soft uniform tunic. Soon he was crying so hard he couldn't even think. He just clung to Kirk and sobbed. Once started, it was as if he would never stop. And all the time he shivered with the terrible cold that seemed to have become one with his very bones.

Kirk's head was in a whirl. He realized now what McCoy had been trying to tell him, how terribly vulnerable the drugs, the brutal savagery of Karn, and Turin's seduction had left the Vulcan. And then he, in a misplaced fit of rage over his own guilt, had neglected to see to Spock's needs. Now, that Spock, the ever-logical, undemonstrative touch-telepath who shunned unnecessary contact, was now crying uncontrollably in his arms, trembling on the edge of hysteria. Kirk's arms tightened around his friend, rocking him gently, murmuring soothingly as the Vulcan's tears continued to fall. "It's all right," he repeated, stroking the bent head softly. "It's all right. You're safe now. You're home!" He kept repeating that mantra until the shuddering and sobs began to subside.

Spock's breath caught on a sob. He didn't really hear what Kirk was saying, only the tone of his voice registered, comforting, compassionate, caring. And suddenly Spock felt warm again, more than warm, protected! Finally the tears stopped and so did the shivering.

Feeling Spock gaining control of himself, Kirk gradually loosened his hold, but did not let the Vulcan go entirely. Spock did not pull away.

"Done?" Kirk asked, very gently, a good while after the last of the sobs and tremors had finished shaking the Vulcan's body.

Spock nodded, reluctantly, slowly sitting up again. When he drew away, Kirk let him go.

"I beg forgiveness, Captain. I have disgraced myself with my lack of control," Spock said hesitantly, lowering his eyes in embarrassment and averting his face.

Kirk marvelled that after all he'd been through Spock could still be so concerned over a loss of face before his friend.

"Spock. Spock, look at me!"

When the Vulcan did not obey, Kirk reached out and gently drew him around, forcing Spock to meet his gaze. Compassionate eyes met eyes filled with pain and confusion.

"Damn it, Spock *will you listen!*" Kirk said in sudden frustration. "*You've* done nothing that needs to be forgiven. What happened *wasn't* your fault." Kirk sighed heavily. "Spock, I know this won't make much sense, but when humans think they've lost someone, somebody close to them, and that person gets hurt and we can't prevent it, we tend to cast those fears onto the cause for our worry when we know he's safe again. I told you it doesn't make much sense," Kirk finished ruefully, seeing the look of puzzlement on Spock's face. "And if anyone needs to ask forgiveness, it's me. Dear God! When I think what you went through and what I said ... " he shook his head. "It's a wonder *you* want anything to do with me!"

"Jim, please, do not blame yourself. I do not," Spock said quickly. "I am pleased that you want me to stay. I was concerned that my presence would be distasteful to you after what ..." he

faltered. Kirk slowly raised his right hand and brushed a tear from Spock's face with gentle fingers.

"I am *very* sorry." Kirk repeated quietly. After a minute, he gave a bitter chuckle. "McCoy said you'd forgive me." Kirk sighed. "Exactly how much do you remember of what happened while you were drugged?" Kirk asked gently after a few moments.

"All of it, Jim," Spock replied quietly. He looked at Kirk, "The Doctor says he understands, that he does not believe I am at fault."

"He's not as stupid as I am sometimes."

For a second, Kirk hesitated, then continued, "Spock ... about that tape ... Joanna's got it."

He took a deep breath.

"It was quite a tape," Kirk said shaking his head, bemused by the memory of the contents. "She came to me and demanded it. She's going to destroy it."

Spock blushed. He looked down at the floor. "I have never experienced anything quite so ... emotional."

Kirk gave a slight shake of his head, "With Joanna ... it's very understandable. There have been times ..." he mused. "But Turin?"

"The drug destroyed everything, Jim. All my shields, my controls. With every touch, be it male or female, I was being overloaded with emotion, lust. That is what the drug was designed for. It releases all inhibitions. It is a very potent aphrodisiac. No one is immune. And I was given massive doses of the undiluted drug by Karn and his soldiers during my 'training.'"

"McCoy mentioned that Karn had really hurt you, but he didn't know any specifics."

"It is something I would rather not talk about."

Kirk nodded. He would respect Spock's wish for now. "If you should change your mind, either McCoy or I will be here. By the way, where were you earlier? I turned this ship upside down trying to find you."

"I was attempting to meditate but I had difficulty concentrating. Memories kept intruding."

"You shouldn't go off by yourself like that. At least until we know if you're all right."

Spock sighed. "I promised to contact McCoy if I felt ill."

Kirk looked at him skeptically. "And just how do *you* define ill?"

Spock looked back to him, a twinkle in his eye. "I assure you, I intend to tell the Doctor if there's anything unusual."

"I wish I could believe that," Kirk sighed. "Now, what about Joanna?"

Spock looked at him innocently.

"How do you feel about her?" Kirk prompted.

"Feel?" Spock repeated. "I do not understand?"

"Her involvement in all this, what you and she did back there."

Spock sighed. "Jim, I ... I truly am baffled. It is very hard to explain."

"A complex situation at best," Kirk nodded.

"Indeed."

"Exactly how much was she involved in this mess?"

"She was involved intimately from the beginning. She was instrumental in keeping me out of Karn's hands for quite some time. She seemed to be concerned about my well being. She also did everything possible to keep Turin away from me. Unfortunately, there came a time in which she was unable to do anything." Spock stopped, deep in thought for a moment, remembering. When he resumed, his eyes were full of a dawning wonder. "Jim, if you could have seen ... It was truly a masterful performance. I am sure that Turin had no idea of just what she was doing. It was as if she commanded his every move and he had no choice but to obey. And yet she did it in such a way that Turin had no idea he was being manipulated." Spock shook his head in wonder. "She even came between Turin and Karn to protect me. Turin was going to send me with Karn," he answered in response to the question in Kirk's eyes. A feeling of awe crept over him as he remembered her beauty, her inner strength as she angrily berated Karn for his brutal actions that night in Turin's chamber. "Truly remarkable."

"What happened to change that?"

"It was at the feast. I embarrassed Turin in front of his guests. I believe I was drugged. I was beginning to lose my shields. It was most disconcerting. Then Turin ... he expected me to engage ... Jim, I could not! Joanna attempted to get his attention, but he was too angry. I ran, but was intercepted by Karn and brought back. Turin forced the undiluted drug on me. From that point on, I was helpless. I was then given to Karn for my 'training.'" Spock had begun to tremble, his voice shaking as he related the events.

"Spock, it's all right, it's over!" Kirk said soothingly.

Spock took a breath and visibly pulled himself together. "I will be all right. It is still frightening to think about. And I have only now realized the dangerous game Joanna was playing. One slight misstep and her life would have been forfeit. I cannot believe that Karn would have been gentle with her either."

"Sounds like the kind of guy you love to hate," Kirk muttered.

"Yes!"

"The two of you need to talk," Kirk repeated gently.

"We spoke in the caverns, but I have not seen her since our return. She told me I had underestimated the situation. She was quite correct."

"You owe her a lot"

Spock sighed. "I owe her my life," he said quietly.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes. "Hungry Spock?" Kirk asked suddenly.

"Yes," Spock said realizing he was, indeed, hungry.

Joanna sighed and slouched on the couch in her quarters. This was her seventh Scotch. It hadn't helped. Images from the tape danced in her mind. Memories mingled with the images. She looked at the chrono. Three AM. Tossing the rest of the drink down, she left the room. Maybe walking would help. Gods knew nothing else had. She made her way to the observation deck.

The view took her breath away. This had always been one of her favorite spots on *Ranger*, standing, watching the galaxy pass always helped put things in perspective. She hoped it

would tonight. Her perspective was, she had to admit, badly skewed.

Spock leaned on the rail of the walkway, a solitary figure against the star dotted light. Joanna stood and watched him for long moments, then, as if a decision had been made, she moved to stand just behind him. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Spock whirled around, surprised that he had not heard her approach.

"I'm sorry, did I startle you?"

"No ... yes. I was deep in thought," he told her.

"You can't sleep either, huh?"

Spock shook his head, then looked at her. The starlight was reflected in her eyes. He felt himself becoming entranced and forced himself to look elsewhere. "Jim ... Captain Kirk told me I should speak to you," he started without preamble.

Joanna leaned against the rail, watching the passing stars. "Quite the psychiatrist, isn't he," she commented. She turned to Spock. Her heart ached. She wanted to reach out, to touch him. But she knew in another few hours Spock would get the antidote and be Spock once again. She didn't want to hurt anymore.

Spock looked down at his feet. She was not making this easy. "There are issues we must resolve. How we feel about what went on, is going on," he told her quietly.

The comment surprised her. She hadn't honestly thought about it in those terms. Once they had returned to the ship, she had expected him to return to his normal Vulcan self as if *Enterprise* had some magical cure for the drug still swirling in his system. Now, the irrationality of that thought came home like a thunderclap. He still had not received the antidote and only that would cleanse him of the drug's effects. His statement was forcing her to face feelings she preferred to ignore. *Damn you, Spock! Why you! How did you get through all those carefully constructed defenses I built!*

"What the hell do you want me to say, Spock?" Joanna answered out loud. She ran a hand through her hair. "Gods, Spock! You're here, you're safe. You don't need my protection any more. What more do you want from me?"

Spock reached out and took her hand, pulling her after him into a nearby alcove and closing the door. He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her against his chest. "I have no answers ... for either of us," he answered. "I only know, somehow, you have become woven into the fabric of my life. I do not want to lose you. I do not want to lose that part of me that you have brought to life." His confession surprised her.

"That's the drug, Spock!" she told him wearily.

"No," he answered, holding her tight. "Even with the drug, I knew there was something only you had awakened."

Joanna willed herself not to respond but to no avail. In her mind arose the memories of that morning in the bath when he had held her, kissed her. She knew then she was in love with him. In love, but with something deeper, almost a bonding of souls. She remembered what she had done with him and felt desire rising. Her eyes snapped open. Was it really only her memories? Was she the only one that had been thinking about it, or had he? She realized that Spock had broken off the embrace and was looking at her sadly.

"Does it shame you to remember?" he asked quietly. She could hear the hurt in his voice.

"No, Spock, no." she replied huskily, reaching for him again. "I'm not ashamed of anything that we did together." She sighed as he bent to kiss her. This was not how she had intended this meeting to turn out. Reaching over to the door of the private observation booth they had moved to, she hit the switch and locked it. Stars, gas clouds, nebula, swept passed in a multi-colored panoply as they became lost in each other. She felt his lips on her neck, brushing her skin, sending chills through her. It did not take long for their passion to rise higher. Soon, even the stars were forgotten as the two bodies locked together in their union.

Joanna waved a greeting to the lab personnel as she made her way to the area her father had set aside for her to work in. She flipped the terminal on and called up information on Spock's blood analysis. It was all there, nice and impersonal. She started a few preliminary tests, and sat back, watching the data flow across the screen. After a few minutes the data flow ended. 'Inconclusive,' she thought. She started again, trying a new approach. Again, nothing.

She stared at the innocent looking molecular structures on the screen in front of her. "Ok, let's try it this way," she muttered to the computer.

Combination after combination was tried. Nothing was working. The chemical still refused to yield its secrets. She sat back in the chair and glared at the screen. "So, we're playing hard to get, are we? Fine, be that way. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve," she mumbled tiredly, rubbing her eyes. "Coffee," she thought. "That's what I need."

She got up and walked over to the dispenser. Turning around, she almost bumped into Spock who had entered quietly. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"I must speak with you," he said as she resumed her seat.

"Ok, talk."

"You were not there when I awakened."

"I know." She moved around him to the food and beverage unit. She kept her back to him. She couldn't bare to look at him. It hurt too much. "I didn't want to wake you. It seemed to be the first peaceful sleep you had in days."

"But ..."

"Look, Spock, it's over. Finished," she said whirling on him. "You get on with your life, I'll get on with mine."

"Why?"

"Because once you get that antidote you'll forget about me," she whispered.

"No!" he told her forcefully as he took her by the arms.

"Yes, Spock. You'll be Vulcan again. The emotions that the drug allowed to come out will be packaged away with your human half in the back of your wonderful, analytical mind. Love will become something only humans are subject to once again. Even if you do really, truly love me you won't acknowledge it because it isn't the Vulcan way. Well I've got news for you. Your father has no trouble expressing his love for your mother. In case you never noticed, he does it in subtle, unobtrusive ways. Any fool can see how much he's in love with her. But you, you won't let is show because love isn't Vulcan or a Kholinar teaching!"

He moved toward her but she stopped him. "Get out, Spock and take your teachings with you. Leave me in peace. I can't have you so let me have my memories." Tears ran down her cheeks.

Spock had no reply for her. He simply turned and left the lab..

McCoy watched him go, torn between wanting to go after Spock and wanting to throttle Joanna. He had stopped by the doorway, coming in on their "discussion." It had been a long time since he had been this mad at his daughter. Anger won. "Joanna!" he roared, stalking over to her. "Have you lost your mind! That's Spock goddammit! You can't play games like that with him. He doesn't know the rules!"

"I'm not playing games! There is more to the universe than computers!" she yelled back.

"He's a Vulcan, damn it!"

"Precisely."

"You don't seem to understand!"

"No, you're the one that doesn't seem to understand!" she shot out of the chair, standing face to face with her father, blue eyes locking in battle. "When he gets the antidote, he's gonna be back the way he always was. I'm gonna be the one out of luck! How do you think that makes me feel?! Everyone's been so damned concerned about Spock's feelings. Nobody gives a damn about what I feel!" This time the tears started in earnest.

"You really do care for him don't you?" McCoy asked quietly.

"Yes, damn it, I do. And I don't know what to do about it."

McCoy took her in his arms. She was right. All this time they had all been concerned about Spock. He hadn't taken her feelings into consideration. "Shhhh. It's gonna be all right," he told her. He could feel the wetness from her tears coming through his tunic. He held her until the tears stopped.

"I didn't ask for this. I don't want to love him."

"It's a little late for that," he answered gently, still holding her. "You took responsibility in that room, with Turin and Spock. You could have had Turin send him out."

Joanna nodded. "I know. But something happened. He looked at me and all my good intentions flew out the window."

"Yeah. Good intentions generally have a way of making things backfire on you," he sighed. "Look, I'll help with what I can, but you have to decide what you're going to do about Spock."

"I know," she said, rubbing her eyes. She shook her head and smiled ruefully, "I was so sure of myself, that everything was under my control. Oh Dad, I've made such a mess of this!"

"We all have!" McCoy sighed.

"Well, the sooner this antidote gets here, the sooner this mess gets resolved," she sighed.

McCoy nodded, accepting the hint. "Holler if you need help."

"I will. Thanks, Dad." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

Kirk looked up as Spock entered his cabin. "Hello, Spock. Jesus, what happened to you?" he finished as he got a good look at his First Officer's face.

"Captain, I wish to request leave."

Kirk sat back in his desk chair and looked at the Vulcan. "All right, Spock. I'll bite."

"Bite, Sir?" Spock questioned, momentarily diverted.

"It means I'm listening. It means I'm curious and I want to hear more."

"Are you still having nightmares?"

"I was until Joanna ..."

"Good, you've talked to her, then," Kirk broke in.

Spock sank slowly into a chair. "Jim, last night we did more than talk. It was ... " he stopped, groping for a word. He caught sight of Kirk's interested look and blushed slightly.

"Wonderful?" Kirk supplied, gently.

"Yes," Spock nodded. "Then this morning she ... I ... Jim, she said she could not be involved with me because I would not acknowledge love."

"Explain, Spock."

"She believes I want to be the perfect Vulcan, that I do not believe in love and that 'the emotions that the drug allowed to come out will be packaged away with my human half in the back of my wonderful, analytical mind' was how she put it." Spock looked frankly at Kirk, "Jim, I know what I am experiencing. I want this woman in my life. I love her."

"Then fight for her. Make her believe that nothing's going to change. Make her believe that you want to be with her, that you love her."

Spock nodded. "It will not be easy. She has made up her mind."

"Then find a way, Spock. You have to!"

She woke with a start. Frantically she looked around the room. She could've sworn someone called her name. Coming back to herself, she became aware of her surroundings. She lay on her bed, fully clothed, except for her shoes. Someone had come in and removed those and covered her. She distinctly remembered just falling on the bed last night. Glancing at the small bedside table, she saw a note from her father.

"Call me when you wake. Dad," she read. Shrugging she reached for the com then saw the time, 1100. "Shit!" She hit the button and hailed her father.

"McCoy here," his voice returned.

"Why the hell didn't you wake me?"

"You needed the rest. Jim told me he finally roused you out of this place around 0200."

"I've got to get ..."

"I've started running the tests on the computations you set up last night. We don't have a final yet, but so far it doesn't look promising."

"What are we missing, Dad?"

"I don't know, but I'm willin' to bet it's as plain as the nose on your face."

"I know. I keep thinking that too. I'll be down as soon as I get a shower and eat. And ... there's a stop I need to make."

"See ya then, Darlin'. McCoy out."

The com went quiet. She sat on the bed, staring at the wall. What was it? Why couldn't they find the answer? Shaking her head, she headed for the shower. It was going to be a busy day.

Spock sat, staring at the attunement flame. His thoughts were still confused. He had wanted to see Joanna, but didn't dare try. He wasn't sure he could stand another rebuff. He had attempted to speak with her again the day before. Why couldn't she understand? He had sat and analyzed the situation. He was sure his feelings for her were not simply due to the drug. It was something deeper. Something beyond that. She had reached in and touched his soul so gently and so beautifully that he found himself not wanting to be without her. She was part of him. And he knew, with a surety he could not justify, that he was part of her. But how to make her understand?

The door chime interrupted his thoughts. He moved to open it, paused, then pushed the button. To his surprise, Joanna stood on the other side. "Come in," he invited, noticing the looks of passing crew members. He waited until the door had closed to say more.

"Spock, I've done some thinking," she started. She ran her hand through her hair. "I have ... Yesterday I said some things that were not very nice." She shook her head remembering. "Actually, they were downright nasty. I had no right to say them. My only excuse was that I was scared." She looked up at him. "I'm still scared. But that does not give me carte blanche to treat you the way I did. I'm very sorry. My words and actions were inexcusable."

"I accept your apology," he said quietly. Spock wondered if she was done or would say more.

Joanna looked down at the floor, then back at him. "This isn't easy for me, Spock. I've been fighting with myself for days on this and I took it out on you." She paused again. "You were right to believe I cared about you. I did and, Gods help me, still do. Very much. I drew back the way I did because I don't know if I'll be able to live without you in my life. I'm terrified of you being in it and I'm terrified of you not being in it."

Spock looked at her for a stunned moment. Of all the things he expected to hear, this was not one of them. "I, too, am frightened. I want you in my life."

Joanna smiled at him. She was so tired. Tired of fighting herself, her ghosts, her past, everything. All she wanted him to do was hold her and make her feel everything would be fine - at least for a little while. "The reality of the situation is that sooner or later you'll get the antidote. Then where will I be?"

"We will make it work." He moved to her and put his arms around her. "I will make it work!"

The whistle from the com interrupted them. "Spock," McCoy's voice cut through the air. The Vulcan moved to the com. "Spock here."

"Report to Sickbay."

"At once, Doctor."

"Sounds like it might be sooner," Joanna mumbled.

Spock looked at her quizzically.

"Sounds like the antidote is here."

"Or your father could require another blood sample."

"Maybe," Joanna smiled. "Well, let's not keep the man waiting."

"One moment," Spock stopped her. Taking her face in his hands he kissed her.

Joanna responded, feeling tears burning behind her eyes. She didn't want this moment to end. She prayed it wouldn't. Still, she knew it would. And she would have the memory of that gentle sweetness forever. That was the one thing that no one would ever take from her.

"Now we can go," Spock said, waiting for her to precede him.

McCoy looked up as he saw Joanna, followed by Spock, come in. "Took you long enough," he grumbled.

Joanna's gaze fell on Christine and Sobutai and she knew. She clamped her jaws shut and moved away from the group. She felt her stomach fall through the floor, her heart felt squeezed. Tears threatened. She was right. It was sooner.

McCoy picked up the hypospray and started to press it to Spock's arm, then noticed the Vulcan was looking at Joanna. He quickly looked over at his daughter. Her eyes were locked with Spock's. Slowly, she gave a small nod. Spock responded in kind, then looked forward, as if he could not bear to see her reaction. "You may proceed, Doctor."

The hypospray hissed. It sounded loud. Spock felt, more than heard Joanna leave the room. And he knew he had hurt her in the end. It was the one thing he had never wanted to do.

He felt his shields slowly reforming. Years of training made it easy for him to rebuild them. He felt his control coming back, as if from a great depth. He had never been so glad that his mother insisted he learn to block out the telepathic noise around himself with his shields gone, though. It had made this time without his usual shields bearable. Soon, that impenetrable Vulcan mask was back. But there was one thing that hadn't changed. He still wanted to be with her. He still felt her presence. And he still wanted to touch her. It was like a dull ache inside him. Now, more than ever, he was sure.

McCoy watched Spock's face change its expression as he kept one eye on the sensors. "How long does it take for this stuff to work, Chris?" McCoy asked.

"I don't know. With humans and Teronians it doesn't take too long. Being that Mr. Spock is humanoid, with human blood, I don't anticipate it taking much longer than five minutes to completely work," she answered, keeping an eye on Spock. She had given brief thought as to why Joanna left.

"I'll see you at dinner, Chris," Sobutai told her quietly and left. He had to find Joanna. She looked a wreck. And that exchange between her and Spock ...

Chapel nodded, not taking her eye off the sensors. "How do you feel, Mr. Spock?"

"I am fully restored, Dr. Chapel," Spock replied. "If I am no longer needed here, I should like to return to my duties."

"Yep, he's back to normal," McCoy snorted. "Well, I hate to burst your bubble, Spock, but you're gonna stay here a little longer. I want to make sure everything keeps working ok."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "As you wish, Doctor," he said, resigned. He could not argue with the Doctor's logic.

"So you got this stuff from your priest friend, eh?" McCoy grinned at Chapel. "Did he

give you any of the drug for us to analyze.”

“It's in the lab now. Results should be here shortly.”

“Great! Now we'll know what was hiding from us. We couldn't synthesize it for love or money.”

Spock stared at the ceiling of the Sickbay. He wanted to be away from there. There were things he had to do. He needed to get back to duty and he needed to find Joanna, not in that order. He listened to the drone of voices around him and put himself into a light meditative trance. He desperately needed solutions to the questions that plagued him.

McCoy turned to look for Joanna. She was gone. He had been so intent on Spock he hadn't heard her leave. “Now where'd that girl go?” he grumbled.

“Sobutai went to look for her,” Chapel told him as she continued to monitor the readings. She gave McCoy a “tell me what's been goin on here' look.

McCoy looked at the readings she had been charting and snorted. “Well, Spock, everything seems normal. No fluctuation in your vital signs. You say everthing's back the way it was. I have to take your word on that. I'm gonna let you go. But if you notice anything, and I mean anything, you let me know.”

Spock nodded. Taking his cue, he rose and left Sickbay.

McCoy watched the Vulcan leave. He stared at the closed door for a minute, then shook his head.

“Just what has been going on here while I've been gone?” Chapel's voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Come into my office.” McCoy walked in, waited for her to sit and closed the door. He poured two drinks, handed her one. “You're never going to believe this,” McCoy started. He looked at her closely. “Chris, I hope you don't think I'm out of line here, but I have to know what your feelings toward Spock are.”

Christine took a sip of the brandy. She shrugged, “I've gotten over my ... infatuation. Unrequited love can only go on for so long, then it gets old. Besides, I've re-established my past relationship with Pritr. That is much more rewarding,” she smiled. “Why?”

“Well ... It seems that the drug destroyed Spock's defenses enough to let his true feelings bleed through. Because of that, he has a certain ... attachment to Joanna.”

“Attachment, hell. He's in love with her. And she's in love with him. Didn't you see their faces? Why do you think she had to leave? Right now she's probably convinced there's absolutely no chance for her with Spock back to his Vulcan self.”

“Probably?” McCoy snorted. “You know how he is. God forbid any feelings should dare intrude on his being Vulcan!”

Christine just looked at him in disbelief, shaking her head. “Listen to yourself, Leonard McCoy! You're as bad as Spock. He's got you so hooked into seeing him as he wants to be seen that you no longer see who he really is. You've been after him for years to admit that he does have feelings. Now that you've seen it and experienced it, *you* refuse to acknowledge it.” She shook her head. “You can't have it both ways.”

McCoy stared at her. “You got all this in five mintes in Sickbay?”

"And a two day trip with a cousin who was going crazy with worry," she muttered. Sipping his brandy, he thought about what she had said. "I guess you're right, Chris."

"And Joanna sees him the same way, as Vulcan rather than as Spock."

"That's been Joanna's main concern. That after he got the antidote he would not be able to relate to her."

"Then she's as much a fool as certain other people I could name. One of them is right here in this office."

McCoy looked at her challengingly. "And just what would you suggest that *we* do about this?"

"I would suggest that 'we' don't do anything. Spock is going to have to find some way to convince Joanna that he can still express his feelings for her."

"If he really wants to," McCoy muttered.

"There you go again, Leonard! Of course he wants to!"

"Next time I have a problem with my love life I'll be sure to schedule an appointment," McCoy responded, throwing up his hands.

"Certainly, Doctor. But it'll cost you!"

Spock looked around the bridge. His duty shift was almost over. For the first time in as long as he could remember he couldn't wait for it to end. He had to find Joanna. He had looked for her as soon as he left Sickbay, but he couldn't find her. He needed to reassure her, make her see that things could be worked out between them. He looked up as the bridge doors opened, hoping it was his relief. He sighed as he realized it was just someone with another report for the Captain.

Kirk looked around at the drumming noise. It was Spock tapping his fingers on the console ... again. He heard a slight giggle from Uhura and realized she, too, was aware of the Vulcan's growing impatience. Moments later, Sulu was trying to find the source of the noise. "Um, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Why don't you go ahead and take off. I don't want you to overdo your first day back." He turned to Uhura ready to instruct her to call Spock's relief to the bridge.

"But, Captain, my shift is not over."

"Spock, go!"

"Yes, Captain." He got up and moved quickly to the turbolift.

"Captain, we will be arriving at Ystis in 12 hours at this speed," Sulu reported.

"Very well. Carry on, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

Spock headed for Joanna's quarters. He needed to find her and talk to her. Time was running out. Soon they would be back at Ystis and she would be leaving the ship and any chance of changing her mind would be lost. He rang the door chime, but there was no answer. He hesitated for a moment, then using priority override, entered the room. It was empty. He stood for a moment thinking where to look next. Perhaps she was visiting Sobutai. He arrived there

just as Sobutai was exiting the room.

"I am looking for Joanna," Spock started.

"Aren't we all," Sobutai replied. "I think she was here. There's an empty glass sitting by a three-quarters empty Scotch bottle on the table inside." He shook his head, "I don't see how she can drink that stuff."

Spock, no longer listening, headed for the turbolift. "Observation Deck," he said as he entered. Seconds later he stepped out in front of the deck entrance. Taking a deep breath, he stepped through the door. Moving up the ramp, he glanced in the alcoves. She was sitting in the one they had shared, staring at the passing stars.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he murmured, standing beside the entrance.

Joanna looked up at his voice. "I'm gonna miss it," she told him. "I'm gonna miss a lot of things."

He sat next to her, closing the door. "It does not have to be that way."

"Don't humor me."

"I do not understand."

"Yes you do. Your comin' here, pretendin' nothin's changed. That everything's gonna be the same between us. And you know as well as I do that that's impossible."

"It is not impossible. Granted, it may be difficult, but I have noted the human ability to adapt to various situations."

"Damn it Spock! Don't you dare patronize me!" She slammed her fist on the door button and stormed out.

He stood staring after her. He'd done it again!

Her momentum carried her to Sobutai's quarters. He looked up as Joanna stormed through the entrance. He took one look at her, refilled her glass and held it out to her.

"Thanks," she said tossing the drink down.

Sobutai cringed. "What happened?" he asked refilling her glass.

"Spock!" she replied disgustedly. "You'll never believe what he's come up with now!"

"Not in my wildest dreams," Sobutai agreed.

"He says we can work it out. We, hah! He means me! Humans adapt!" She emptied the second glass.

He refilled it again. "Uh huh," he said noncommittally.

"Damn Vulcans think they're so damned superior. It's always the poor humans that have to 'adapt.' Well not this human!" She drained her glass a third time.

Sobutai winced, then poured her another. "Joanna, don't you think ..."

"Well we poor humans have managed quite well without the help of their Vulcan superiority. And for all I care, they can shove their unemotional selves up their unemotional asses!"

He watched as the liquid disappeared again. "Geez, Jo, don't you think you oughta hold off a little?"

"And who the hell made you my keeper?"

"Fine, take the whole damn bottle! In fact take my whole damn supply! I'll be back when

you're ready to listen." He stalked out, angrier than he had been for a long time.

"Listen to what?" she snarled as she threw the empty glass at the door. "More preaching? Not in my lifetime!" She looked around for another glass; not finding any she raised the bottle to her lips.

Sobutai moved swiftly down the corridor trying to get his anger under control.

"Hey, Sobutai!"

He turned at the sound of Uhura's voice. "Yes, lovely lady?" he said, turning.

"What happened?"

Sobutai shrugged. "Joanna's in a bit of a ... snit."

"Spock," Uhura said knowingly.

"It seems he tried to tell her they could work things out and she's not having any of it."

"I see," Uhura said.

"You do?" Sobutai replied. "Then maybe you can explain it to me."

"She's afraid. And Spock is not the most tactful person to deal with, especially when he's being Vulcan."

"But he is Vulcan," Sobutai said, mystified.

"Only half. And sometimes that half can be the biggest pain ..." she shook her head.

"How can they be so stupid!"

"Got me. Maybe it was the Scotch."

"How can she drink that stuff," Uhura grimaced.

"Speaking of drinks, would you care to have one with me?"

"As long as it isn't Scotch."

"Never touch the stuff."

Spock rang the chime on Kirk's quarters. He entered at the invitation.

Kirk looked up from his reading, took one look at his friend's face and closed the book.

"Now what did you do?"

Spock sat down heavily, not waiting for an invitation. "Jim, I don't know."

"Tell me what happened," Kirk prompted.

"Joanna expressed concern that she was losing some things she cared about. I tried to tell her it didn't necessarily need to happen."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Kirk said doubtfully.

"No," Spock agreed. "But she became quite angry with me and left."

Kirk surveyed the Vulcan for a moment. "Spock, just what *exactly* did you say?"

Spock repeated the earlier conversation verbatim.

"Oh, Lord, Spock," Kirk sighed, lowering his forehead onto his hand.

"I did say something wrong," he said unhappily.

"Did you ever! I thought the idea was to tell her that you were able to change, not that she would have to change for you."

Spock replayed the conversation back in his own mind, realizing just what he had said.

"Perhaps she is correct," he said sadly. "Thank you for listening, Jim." He got up to go.

"Wait a minute," Kirk said, startled. "Are you just giving up?"

"It seems I must."

"You could try again."

Spock looked at him in disbelief. "Everytime I talk to her I make things worse."

"Spock, I told you, if you really want her, you're gonna have to fight for her."

"Fighting is all we do, Captain," Spock replied dryly as he went out the door.

Joanna headed down the corridor. *Enterprise* had put into orbit around Ystis. It was time for her to take her leave of *Enterprise* and her father. McCoy looked up from his work as Joanna entered his office. "Well, Dad, I'm ready to go home," she said as she sat down.

"Jim says we have some time before we have to leave for our next assignment. Would you like some company?"

"Is it the company you're interested in or is it that aged Saurian brandy that I keep in my cabinet?"

"Both," he grinned. "Well, how 'bout it?"

"Let's blow this gin joint," she grinned back.

Moments later they stood outside her house. McCoy's mouth dropped open. "You live here?"

"No ... I'm the maid. Of course I live here. I don't usually take people home to other people's houses."

The house was a white two-story surrounded by trees and flowering bushes. McCoy admired the landscaping as Joanna let him in through the huge double doors. He looked back and up at the smoked glass arch surrounding the intricately carved doors through which they had just entered. The foyer was cream colored. Silurian marble tiles lay under foot. But it was the pictures that drew McCoy's attention. Original paintings adorned the mauve living room walls. He wandered into the living room, staring. They reflected a range of styles, including two copies, one of a Renoir, the other a Degas. The decor in the room was one of simple elegance. Rose and mauve colors wove together, blending with each other on wall and floor providing the perfect backdrop for the furnishings. Plants sat here and there, some in bloom, their fragrance gently wafting through the air.

"Here, Dad. Aged Saurian brandy, as promised."

"I thought you were kidding."

"Would I kid another McCoy about aged Saurian brandy?"

He sipped the drink, feeling the smooth burn of the liquid as it slid down. He walked to the window facing out into a large garden. First thing he spotted was the magnolia tree in full bloom. He smiled to himself, then spotted a fireplace sitting off to one side of a stone patio.

"Reminds me of home," he said.

"What does?"

"The tree, the fireplace.

"Dr. McCoy."

"Yes," two heads turned as two voices answered. They both started to laugh as the housekeeper shook her head.

"So this is your father. What are you thinking of, making him stand in the middle of the living room when you've got all these nice chairs?!"

"Dad, this is the tyrant who runs my house ... and me when I'm home."

"Well, somebody has to. Now, Doctor, you come over here, have a nice seat. Put your feet up."

Joanna watched, laughing. "Don't fight it, Dad. It's no use. Kalla runs this place, not me!"

Kalla shot Joanna a skeptical look and shook her head. "Now don't you go and lie to your father."

Joanna shook her head and grinned. "Let me go change. Kalla, we haven't had breakfast yet. Would you be a dear and get us something?"

Joanna returned a few minutes later. Her riding pants, boots and shirt had been replaced by a pair of loose fitting silk pants with a matching blouse. McCoy looked up, then looked again.

"Very nice."

"Thank you, sir." She poured herself a glass of white wine and joined her father. "So, what would you like to do?"

"How about we sit and talk."

"No, I don't think so," she muttered as she absently flipped through her messages. Her next comment was interrupted by McCoy's communicator beeping.

"McCoy here."

"Bones ... Good news. We can stay here for a forty-eight."

"That's great, Jim. Why?"

"We get to transport the hospitals best and brightest to Centros for their lift to Starfleet Academy."

"Sounds good." He looked at Joanna as she waved at him.

"Captain, why don't you join us for dinner, then," she invited. "I have a wonderful barbecue down here. Bring the gang."

"Thank you, Doctor. We'll be there. 1800 hrs?"

"Perfect."

"Good, see you then; Kirk out."

Joanna closed the communicator and handed it back to her father.

Spock materialized in front of the house. He studied it for a moment. It was dark, all the guests had left; the only illumination coming from the nightlighting on the stairway. He had refused to come down to the barbecue. But as he sat in his quarters, Kirk's words repeated over and over. Finally, he made up his mind to do just what Kirk suggested. Spock nodded to himself as he surveyed the house; it suited her. He stepped up to the doors and rang the bell. There was no answer. He hadn't expected one on the first ring. He rang again, and again. Still, there was

no movement from inside the house. Again he rang and would do so until Joanna answered the door.

Joanna groaned and rolled over. "Go away," she mumbled as she pulled pillows over her head. But the ringing persisted. With a sigh, she slipped a robe on and went down to see who had the nerve to disturb her at this hour.

She opened the door and stared at Spock. "What do you want?" she growled.

"We must talk." Spock told her.

Sighing, Joanna motioned him in. "Ok, make it fast, I want to go back to sleep."

"The feelings we share ..." Spock stated calmly.

"Feelings we ..." Joanna interrupted, then shook her head. "*We* don't share any feelings. And for your information, mine are once again under lock and key!"

"I did not come here to argue!" Spock told her.

"Then why the hell did you come?! It certainly isn't to promote my peace of mind!"

Spock held up two vials of clear liquid, one with a blue top, one with a yellow top. "I have come here to talk to you. I will take this drug if it will facilitate that."

"Are you out of your mind! You think just because you take this drug, things are going to be fine between us?! And you think I'm going to let you? I can't believe you! Get out! Get out and leave me alone!!" Joanna yelled.

"There is absolutely nothing you can do to prevent it." Spock looked at her calmly and flipped the lid off the blue-topped vial and downed the contents. He felt it starting to work instantly. "Now, will you talk to me."

"You son-of-a-bitch! You can't manipulate me. I'm not some brainless tramp that throws herself at you for your amusement! Do you seriously think I'm going to just jump back in bed with you because you're juiced up?! Get a life, Spock! You've spent too much time at warp speeds. It's affected your brain!"

"I have no such conception of you." He felt his control vanish. "What do I have to do to talk to you?!" he shouted. The Vulcan moved to her, gripping her shoulders. "What do I have to do to get it through your head?! I don't want you simply because of your talents in bed!"

"What?!" she shouted back. "Now I'm not any good?! Since when have you become such an expert in sexual relations?!"

"That's not what I said!"

Joanna wrenched herself loose. "I think you'd better get out of here! Get out of my life!"

In one move, he had her by the arms and propelled her backward, falling on the couch.

"Don't you understand?" he grated, "**I can't get you out of mine!**"

Joanna felt the vise-like grip on her arms. She struggled to get free. The situation had rapidly gotten out of control. She was pinned by his weight. His grip was hurting her. "Please stop ... you're hurting me!" she whispered, fear coloring her voice.

Her words stopped him short. His own voice, those same words, echoed through his mind. Slowly he stood, his face a mask of remembered pain. "I ... am sorry," he uttered quietly. "It was never my intent to hurt you. But can't you understand? I cannot live without you." He took a deep breath. "You help drive away the pain, the fears. Feeling you with me keeps the

dreams away," he whispered. "They haunt me ..."

The quiet words sank through the haze. She looked up at him, mystified. "I ... don't understand."

"At first I assumed my feelings for you were a direct cause of the drug. But as the physical effects left me and I could think clearly and reason to a higher degree I found that I still wanted to be with you, to touch you. I was certain when your father gave me the antidote. Once I was fully restored to myself, the feelings, desires, were no different. You have ... 'gotten under my skin.'"

Joanna sat staring. This was the last thing she ever expected to hear from him.

When she did not answer, he turned to leave. His last attempt had failed.

"Spock ..." she called softly.

The Vulcan turned and looked at her. She was standing, framed by the glow of light from the stairs. "Wait!" She quickly crossed the short distance between them and was in his arms.

Spock held her tightly, as if his entire life depended on this moment. Her fragrance intoxicated him. Feeling her body next to his made him ache to show her just what she meant to him. His lips met hers and he felt her instant response. Slowly, they sank to the floor, oblivious to everything. Their mounting desire could no longer be held back as he felt her hands undressing him.

The joining was frantic, furious, as if they could not get enough of each other. Waves crashed over, through them. Their bodies entwined in a passion that was theirs alone, revelling in the unity they had found until the waves drowned them, dashing them against the rocks.

Joanna lay, his arms encircling her, her head on his chest, trying to catch her breath. How could this one man make her feel so complete? "Spock, what's going to happen when you take the antidote?"

"We will remain as we are now."

"How can you know?"

"I know," he told her, running his fingers through her hair.

They lay for some time, holding each other. Neither spoke. Words, somehow, did not seem necessary. Joanna smiled at the warmth of his presence in her mind. It was nothing overt, just a little awareness of his being there. And somehow, her fears had vanished, the uncertainty disappeared. She knew, now, that he would be in her life, always. And she would be in his. No more doubts. Whatever the future held, she would accept, gladly.

Spock suddenly stood, went over to the table where he had set the other vial, picked it up, then handed it to her. After she took it from him, he picked her up in his arms and looked a mute inquiry at her.

"Double doors, top of the stairs," Joanna told him. She laid her head on his shoulder, feeling his movements as he carried her up the stairs and laid her on the bed. As he stood, he caught something out of the corner of his eye. Turning his head, he saw the view from her room. A large window framed the distant mountains, the stars shining round them in their brilliant explosion.

Joanna looked at his profile, then saw the smile spread across his face. "It's a remembrance," she whispered.

"No, it is not a remembrance," Spock said, laying next to her. "It is where you want to be." He kissed her softly, gently, savoring her. "It is who you are."

"Damn! Where did she put 'em?!" Joanna said surveying the living room for the fifth time. Spock stood in the doorway and shook his head. "They do not seem to be anywhere on this floor. Perhaps we should search upstairs." Just then they heard the front door open. Spock turned, poised for flight.

"Through the kitchen, back stairs," Joanna hissed. Instantly, Spock disappeared as Joanna headed to intercept Kalla.

"Well, good morning, Doctor. Just get up, did we? Where's your gentleman friend?"

"Looking for his clothes," Joanna replied, exasperated. "You wouldn't happen to know where they are?"

"Well of course I do. I picked them up and put them ..." she trailed off trying to remember just where she had put them. "Oh my ... I put them with the laundry."

"Good." Joanna headed for the laundry hamper downstairs.

"They've already been picked up. I passed the hovervan as I was coming in."

"Great! Spock's gonna love this," she sighed.

"Are you saying the gentleman has nothing to wear?" Kalla asked, horrified.

"Not a stitch."

"Should I go get him something?"

"And have the whole world know he's here? Not on your life! I'll have something delivered. I'll tell them it's for my father. Everyone knows he's here." Joanna shook her head. A sudden thought occurred to her and she looked at the housekeeper suspiciously. "Kalla ... who did you talk to when you called me off and what did you say?"

"I told Sarah that you were involved with Starfleet."

Joanna broke into laughter. "Well, at least Sarah will know how to answer the millions of questions I'm sure she's getting." Still chuckling, she went upstairs. Closing the door behind her, she plopped down on the bed and looked at Spock. The Vulcan sat crosslegged in a Pappazan chair. She said nothing for long moments. Finally he raised his eyebrow in mute query. "It seems," she sighed, "that your uniform is on it's way to the laundry. I guess you'll just have to stay like that for a while." She grinned wickedly, then added, "I've sent for something for you to wear. In the meantime ..."

Both eyebrows went up. He stood and walked deliberately over to the door, pressing the locking mechanism. He poured her a glass of juice from a tray and handed it to her.

"Instant anticipation of my needs. All men should be so well trained," she joked.

Spock stiffened as if slapped, panic flashing across his face.

She came up off the bed at him. He took one step back and froze.

Joanna halted, suddenly unsure of what to do or say and for a long moment the two of them just stared at each other. Then Spock slowly relaxed and held out his hand to Joanna. She took it, squeezed it briefly, then moved into his arms, holding him tightly. "That was a stupid

thing for me to say," she murmured.

"I cannot get free of the memories," he said quietly. "They still haunt me. I know," he said, holding up his hand to forestall her comment, "as your father would say, I need to 'get it off my chest.'"

"My father generally knows what he's talking about. He can help you. But only if you let him."

"He has offered," Spock admitted. "I will seek him out."

"Don't wait too long." She paused, "Spock, maybe you should take the antidote now."

He shook his head.

"Spock, I don't like what just happened?" She pulled away from him. "Please, take it." Joanna walked to the bedside table and held out the vial. "Besides, I have to know," she said in a low voice.

Spock took the vial, opened it and swallowed the contents. "It will take approximately five minutes to restore ... everything."

Joanna nodded, watching him closely. She saw the subtle changes begin. It was a metamorphosis. His face returned to its usual impassivity, his eyes became opaque as the antidote worked its magic. She sighed, then stared with astonishment as Spock's eyes once more became warm and his lips turned up in a slight smile as he looked at her. Then she was back in his arms and he was kissing her thoroughly. Warm laughter flowed through her as she felt his mind gently reaching out to her. Joyfully, she opened her mind to him, welcoming his mental touch as much as she welcomed his physical presence.

"I told you so," he murmured, caressing her hair.

"I just didn't dare believe it was possible."

He kissed her again.

An hour later Kalla was tapping on the door, tried it, then knocked again.

"Damn," Joanna whispered as she held Spock to her. It was not the best of times for interruptions. "What Kalla?"

"That nice Captain is on the comscreen wanting to know if Mr. Spock, I assume that's the young man's name, is here. And I have a bit of lunch for you."

Joanna rubbed her face, then sighed as Spock moved from her and to the bathroom. Reaching over to the bedside table, Joanna pressed the door release. "You can come in now, Kalla!"

Kalla peeked in, then walked over to a table and set the tray down. She started back out, but was stopped by Joanna's voice.

"What is this fascination you seem to have with feeding us?" Joanna asked.

"It's this nice gentleman I'm concerned about. You know how you are when you get involved in something. You don't eat, you don't sleep. Somebody's got to remind you about these minor little inconveniences when you forget about them yourself."

"No chance of that with you around, Kalla," Joanna shot back.

"If there's anything you need ..."

"We'll call you," Joanna interrupted. She watched Kalla leave, shaking her head. "She

must really like you," she said as Spock returned.

"On what do you base that conclusion?" Spock asked as he got up to lock the door.

"She keeps trying to feed you. She only tries to feed people she likes."

"I am honored," he said.

"Better watch it! Next thing you know, she'll have the wedding invitations ready," she deadpanned.

"Then perhaps we should stop meeting like this," he said, face just as impassive.

"You don't mean that?," she asked quickly. Then, she realized he was joking.

"We do seem to be oversetting the domestic arrangements."

"Well the domestic arrangement will just have to adjust!" she told him firmly. She stretched leisurely.

"Her wisdom is only exceeded by her excellence in cooking," Spock said inspecting the contents of the tray Kalla had left.

"Well, I suppose we'd better see what Jim wants," Joanna sighed.

"It is indeed fortunate that Kalla is looking after my welfare. You certainly are not," Spock teased as he pused the com button. "Yes, Captain?"

"Spock, good. I hope I haven't interrupted anything important. We have received our orders. We leave orbit in twelve hours. Shore leave extends until an hour before departure at 2200 hrs. Oh ... and Bones says you were due in his Sickbay a half an hour ago."

"Very well, Captain. Inform Dr. McCoy that I feel quite well."

"That's not the point Spock," McCoy's irritated voice said across the com.

Spock sighed, "Very well, Doctor. I shall be there in a few moments."

"Where the hell is he?" McCoy said for the fifteenth time as he paced his office.

"He'll be here Bones," Kirk answered.

"He knows we need to do a follow up on him. That screwy system of his could ... Blasted Vulcan! When he gets his mind on one thing he forgets everything else!"

"Calm down, Bones. Besides, he promised he'd let you know if anything went wrong."

"Sure he would," McCoy snorted. "He's just like you in that. Both stubborn as mules when it comes to admitting you might be a little less than perfect! Do you have any idea what kind of headaches you two give me? If you had any idea what that drug did to him you'd want to be sure, too."

At precisely that moment, Spock entered Sickbay. McCoy took in the ever so slightly dissheveled figure and groaned inwardly. Spock looked even less pleased than usual to be summoned to Sickbay. "This way, Spock, I'm all set up for you."

Spock looked at McCoy and without a word stepped over to the table McCoy had indicated. McCoy examined the readings and swallowed.

"Well, Doctor?" Spock asked dryly.

"Your readings ... uh ... indicate some sort of ... uh ... elevations. Not anything from the drug," he added hastily as a frown passed over the Vulcan's face. "They just indicate recent ... uh ... activity..." He trailed off as Spock raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"Your talent for understatement, Doctor, never ceases to amaze me."

"Lord, Spock, I never meant to ... I mean I wouldn't have called you if I'dve known."

"Known what, Doctor?"

"That you were ... I mean that you ..." McCoy took refuge in bluster. "Damn it, Spock! You *knew* you were scheduled for this exam! None of us knows just what that drug might do, whether it's really all out of your system."

Spock sat up and swung his feet off the table.

"And you tell that daughter of mine to kindly remember that you're my patient, not hers!"

"Thank you, Doctor. With your permission I will resume my ... 'activities'," Spock said evenly. With that, he turned on his heel and left.

McCoy walked into his office and poured himself a brandy. 'Well, that certainly was a fiasco,' he thought to himself.

"Well?" asked Kirk.

"He's fine," McCoy snarled.

"Are you sure there's nothing wrong? You sound a little funny."

"Well, Jim, let's put it this way. Have you ever been interrupted at a particularly delicate moment?"

"You don't mean ...?"

"Well, if these crazy readings are what I think they are, you betcha."

"Well, Doctor, it appears they have finally made peace."

"God, I hope so, Jim. I really hope so."

The time had sped by. *Enterprise* would be leaving orbit in 5 hours. McCoy noted, as he sat across the dinner table looking at his daughter, that she looked a lot healthier and happier than she had when they first met on Farouk Tau. And, he marvelled, she had grown into *quite* a woman. "Well, what are you going to be doing with all your free time now that you've resigned from the hospital?" he asked her.

"Travelling with Sobutai; I must say, Sobutai made me quite an offer of partnership," she shrugged. "And meeting up with a certain Vulcan whenever I can."

"That serious, huh?"

She nodded. "That serious. There are moments when it scares the living hell out of me. And then there are those moments when there's nothing more beautiful or wonderful." She sighed, then smiled, "I feel like I'm on a see saw."

"Love is like that."

"Now wait a darn minute," she flared. "I never said anything about love!"

"You didn't have to," McCoy responded dryly. "Everything you've said and done this past week is evidence enough." He looked at her steadily, "Stop fighting it, Jo. Lord knows you deserve every bit of happiness you can find. And if you've found it with Spock, then wonderful for both of you. This is not an armed conflict. Something as beautiful as this happens only once in a lifetime. Some people never find it. Don't be afraid to let yourself love him."

"I think I'm mostly afraid of losing my individuality. I've seen people in love. It's like they become reflections of each other. One gives up something he or she loves because the other

doesn't like it or doesn't agree with it. I've still got to be me. I fought too long and hard for myself and who I am to let it be lost in someone else."

"You know deep inside Spock won't let that happen. He loves you for the person you are. He doesn't want you to be anyone or anything else."

Joanna smiled at her father. "I can always count on you to see the whole picture clearly."

Joanna pushed open the doors that led to the balcony and walked out into the star filled night. Spock stood at the railing looking up into the sky.

"What ya looking at, lover?" she asked as she moved next to him.

"The stars. It has been too long since I took notice of their beauty. When I was a child, I first decided I could not remain on Vulcan. I would never be able to 'fit in.' So I joined Starfleet and refused to notice the beauty that lay around me as we moved through space. I would not acknowledge that part of me that could appreciate it because I thought it was not Vulcan." He turned to Joanna, lifting his hand to her face. "You have given me an entirely new perspective of myself and what is around me. I am once again able to allow myself to see the beauty in the night sky or in the elegant design of a flower, to appreciate it's unique scent. Most importantly, I am no longer ashamed to allow myself to feel or to express those feelings." He paused, glancing back to the sky, then returned his gaze to Joanna. "And I am not ashamed to tell you I love you."

Momentary panic surged through her, then subsided. She had sensed it in his thoughts. To actually hear him say it ... Things had certainly turned out differently that she had imagined. *'I've been afraid of hearing someone say that for quite a long time.'* She felt Spock pull her into his arms and rested her head on his chest. She felt safe, with him and with his love. This was the way she had imagined it would be when she was a little girl. Now, it was if her childhood fantasies had come true. She sighed, then lifted her head to look at him.

"Just do me a favor," she said softly. "Don't get yourself killed, ok? If you died, I don't think I could live."

"As long as I have any control over the situation, I will not lose my life."

Joanna smiled. "Control, the ever intangible force that guides our lives. Just promise me!"

"I will endeavor to remain completely healthy," he told her. "But there are some situations ..."

"Don't! I know what you're going to say. Please don't!"

"And you? You will be doing dangerous things also."

"I won't do anything stupid, if that's what you mean," she grinned. "At least not too many things."

Spock shook his head, smiling. "There are many things in this universe that are beyond our control."

"Control! I'll show you who's in control around here, Mister!" she teased, poking him in the ribs. Suddenly, he turned the tables on her and pulled her down onto the floor of the balcony. Their parting was forgotten as she lost herself in his kiss.

Joanna stood in front of Sobutai's ship, facing Spock, her father and Jim Kirk. The *Enterprise* was leaving orbit an hour, heading to the Trinarr Quadrant and Centros. It would be a while before she would see any of them again. She was determined not to cry, so she put on a cheerful face.

"I'm expecting you to take care of these two, Jim. I know they get into all kinds of trouble out there," she grinned at Kirk.

"Hell, he's the one who needs the taking care of," McCoy growled.

"I'll make sure they behave," Kirk told her, hugging her tightly. "You just take care of yourself."

"I always do," Joanna replied flippantly.

McCoy swept her into his arms and held her for long moments. "See you at Mosar," he whispered, giving her a kiss on the cheek. Stepping back, he cleared his throat, swallowing the lump that had formed there.

"I'll be there," she promised. "Just make sure you are! And no funny stuff this time," she called as the sparkle of the transporter enveloped the two men.

Joanna stood there, looking at Spock. She really wasn't sure what to say to him. She raised her hand in the Vulcan salute, starting to speak, when suddenly, and much to her surprise she was in his arms. The kiss was deep, passionate, leaving her a little breathless, the promise of the next meeting implicit.

"See you at Mosar," he told her smiling, still holding her.

Spock stepped into place and raised his hand, two fingers extended. Joanna stared for a second, the gesture was unmistakable. Then, she extended her fingers and touched his. His voice whispered in her mind, "Beloved." She stepped back and tried to hide the tears that threatened.

"See ya around the galaxy, lover," Joanna whispered as the transporter beam enveloped them.

STAR TREK

"Transition: 2294"

By Steven H. Wilson

"What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

"I'm not."

"Oh, I see."

"Don't patronize me. I'm an adult... practically."

"Adults admit it when they cry."

"Fine."

"What's wrong?"

"He's dead."

"Who? Oh, you mean that animal you always played with."

"You don't have to be so cold about it."

"I'm sorry, son. When you've lived as long as I have, you--"

"You learn to put these things in perspective, I know."

"Don't be snide. But you're right; that's what I was going to say. Pets never live a very long time. That's the sad part of having them. But you've had them die before. What's so hard this time?"

"He was... special. He was my favorite."

"You tried to hang him, as I recall."

"I was little then."

"You also tried to asphyxiate him several times."

"Like I said, I was little--"

"You weren't little when you transported him to the core of a star."

"Well, they need *discipline* sometimes!"

"Is that what you call it?"

"You think I didn't care about him."

"No. I just think he would find it odd to see you crying over him. You treated him like a flyspeck."

"Well, he wasn't really a person. I'm not that juvenile."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"It's just that... well, I like knowing he was there. When I needed cheering up, he made me laugh. He played with me--even though I had to force him sometimes. He was *fun*."

"I know. I went through this too, when I was your age. In time you'll find another pet, that--"

"No! I won't! There aren't any others like him."

"I thought the one with the ears was fairly amusing."

"He's no fun at all. He's always analyzing everything. He doesn't really even have any feelings. The others are all just... dull. The ones I've watched lately all follow the rules. The don't take any chances. They don't have *fun* with life! What's the point of pets like that?"

"Perhaps they'll have a calming influence on you."

"I don't want to be calm. I want to be alive."

"You are. And you will be when their Confederation--"

"Federation."

"Sorry, it's hard to keep track. When their *Federation* has crumbled to dust."

"Why do we let them die so young? Couldn't we--?"

"No. We can't."

"But I could! I've done it--"

"I said no. There are some things you don't interfere with."

"But this one's special! Please--"

"No, Trelane."

"You don't care! You don't have any compassion! How can you just let these poor creatures die when there's something you can do--"

"Calm down, Trelane. You're getting too old for temper tantrums. It's not that I don't have compassion, it's that I understand we all have our place in this universe. Their place is to die young. If we started making them live as long as us, it would disrupt their whole civilization. Their culture is built on the fact that they live only a short span. They're not ready for anything else yet. And we're not gods. We don't have the wisdom to make those kinds of changes, even if we do have the power."

"But just this once! Captain Kirk was my favorite! I could pull him out of his timeline, and--"

"I said no, Trelane. More than any of the others, you must not interfere with Captain Kirk."

"Why? He's dead. They won't miss him!"

"He has a destiny."

"But how... if he's... what are you saying?"

"Probably too much."

"You're saying he's not really dead!"

"I said he has a destiny."

"Then... I'll see him again?"

"Be patient, Trelane. Someday you'll understand."

"I wanna understand now! Tell me!"

"I think you have enough to deal with for now. I'll leave you alone."

"But--! Fine. Whatever."

"Trelane?"

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry. I'll miss him too. I think a lot of people will."



